

Salvation: The Taking of the Carmenta Illustria

by Jesse De La Rosa

Category: Half-Life, Mass Effect

Genre: Sci-Fi

Language: English

Status: Completed

Published: 2012-05-11 16:18:31

Updated: 2015-11-15 19:53:17

Packaged: 2016-04-26 22:25:08

Rating: T

Chapters: 46

Words: 311,108

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: Salvation - Episode I: After a hard fought battle, a little rest and relaxation seems ages overdue. However the proud crew of the SR-2 Normandy is about to be crudely reminded that there is no rest for the wicked... Follow-up to Salvation

1. Chapter 1: R & R

****Salvation: Episode I " The Taking of the Carmenta Illustria****

Disclaimer: This fan-fiction is part of an episodic series taking place after Salvation: A Half-Life/Mass Effect Universe Fan Fiction, which will lead directly to its sequel, Salvation II: Project Prometheus. These episodes and sequel take place OUTSIDE of the Mass Effect 3 continuity. Characters property of their respective companies, Half-Life created by Valve and Mass Effect created by Bioware.

****Chapter 1: R and R****

The room itself wasn't small, if you could call it a room. It was more of a small warehouse or large workshop. But large only in the sense that the opposing walls were a fair distance from each other. However inside, virtually every cubic bit of space was occupied.

Like a thick, metallic cornfield; rows and rows of mechs thronged the workshop floor. A few dozen scrawny metal men standing front to back, shoulder to shoulder with absolutely no room in between them " completely inert.

A large lamp hung from the ceiling, suspended by a thin cable, over a long, cluttered work bench. Most of the room was choked in darkness, shrouding the furthest corners of the small workshop in shadows " a favorable habitat for those things that liked to skitter in the night.

The buzz of an arc welder, the only other light source in the muddled room, crackled at the work bench, as its flashing light painted the dreary walls with dancing silhouettes.

Sparks gushed out from the spine of one of the mechs, hunched over lifelessly at the front of the room, near the work bench. A rear panel door on its chassis hung wide open, as a lone quarian diligently worked away on its innards.

His enviro-suit was covered in grease. And the decorative patterns on his burgundy veil could scarcely be seen under the oil stains, and other blotches of unknown origin.

"There we go." He said softly to himself, pulling his hands out from inside the mech, and bringing a small, pistol shaped welder out with them. His faceplate mask then faded from solid black to a dull burgundy, as the blinding flurry of sparks ceased.

From the stool he sat on, he swiveled around towards his work table, and began sifting through the mound of tools, and parts littered across the top. He dug through wiring and circuit boards, and scattered surplus mech parts around, accidentally knocking a helmet shaped mech head to the floor with a loud slam, as he foraged through his clutter.

Finally finding what he sought, he selectively took a small, square device from the table. It seemed to resemble a silvery card, or circuit board, with a series of connector pins running along its edge, and three small wires attached to its base.

With the device in hand, the veiled machinist then turned back towards his cybernetic project - using careful finesse, he slid it into the mech's spine, and began making the proper connections.

"Leahr'Haan!" An abrasive, yet somewhat diminutive male voice unexpectedly demanded, as the quarian's arm suddenly lit up with his omni-tool, causing him a slightly startled jump.

Breathing a quick sigh, he pulled his hands away from his interrupted task, leaving two of the three wires hanging freely.

"Yeah, I'm here..." The quarian acknowledged indifferently, as he brought his orange glowing forearm up to his flashing mouth piece. "What is it, Tarrik...?"

"Are my mechs finished?" The nasally voice on the other end inquired.

"Yeah, almost..." Leahr'Haan said, as he swiveled around on his stool, and reclined back on his work table, looking out at the rows of machines. "I was just about to finish installing the circuit bypass module on the last one before you called. Then all I need to do is debug their subroutines, and make sure the new configurations took. Shouldn't take more than three or four days, tops."

"You've got twelve hours. We're loading the ship at daybreak tomorrow morning."

"Twelve hours?" Leahr'Haan shouted with an angry gasp, as he bolted up from his stool, knocking it over. "W-What do you mean twelve hours? I can't work with that kind of time frame. I still need to test them! I haven't even programmed the YMIR yet, and it'll be at least another two days before I can..."

"Leahr! Leahr, my boy. Calm down..." The voice from his omni-tool urged with a deep, pronounced breath, interrupting Leahr'Haan, as he paced around in a severe state of nervous agitation. "I've got total faith in you. You can do this... And you will." Tarrik asserted.

Leahr'Haan let his arms drop to his side, and drew his head back - looking up towards the ceiling as he sighed and let his shoulders dangle freely for a moment, before bringing his hologram covered arm back to his face.

"But why...?" He questioned in a defeated tone. "I thought we weren't doing this until sometime next month..."

"Think about it, Leahr..." Tarrik's voice replied condescendingly. "Every Citadel and Alliance patrol cruiser, and detachment has been called back to aid with either the relief effort on Earth, or with resettling the Citadel. The timing for this couldn't be more ideal if we'd planned it!"

"My plan was brilliant before... Now it's full proof." Tarrik continued, reveling in his own arrogance, as Leahr furrowed his brow in confusion, under his faceplate.

"Wait..." The addled quarian replied. "What happened on Earth? What happened on the Citadel...?"

"Hah!" Tarrik let forth a snide chuckle, accompanied by a pronounced breath. "Leahr, you've gotta learn to get out of the workshop more often... Hehe."

The quarian rolled his glinting eyes beneath his faceplate. "Well it's not like I can do that now, can I...?"

"Good point." Tarrik's voice agreed. "But don't worry about it. Just think, within forty-eight hours you'll have more credits than you'll know what to do with. Then again... You could always go back to that life of indentured servitude, where I found you."

Leahr leaned against his work table with his head hung low, as the heavy breathing voice berated him through his omni-tool.

"Eating paste in a shelter somewhere. Digging through refuse to find little knick knacks to take back to that floating scrap heap you call a fleet."

"Enough." Leahr'Haan affirmed angrily, as he brought his arm up to his mask. "You'll have your mechs... But don't insult my people..."

"Excellent." Tarrik replied eagerly. "The ship's name is the Carmenta Illustria. It left port this morning. Kargas and his men are ready. And Kim and his sleepers were notified before its departure."

"Fine... Great..." Learh replied, less than enthusiastic, and clearly annoyed, as he bent down to pick up his stool, and set it up right. "But if you'll excuse me... I've got a lot of work to do."

"That's what I love about you, Learh!" Tarrik declared with a heavy hint of sarcasm, causing the quarian to sneer a bit under his mask, as he sat back down and dug his hands back into the nearby mech's spine. "Always so diligent with your work. And relax... There's nothin' to worry about. I got this all figured out..."

* * *

><p>Carmenta Illustria... The grand, auspicious words seemed to almost jump right off of the gleaming, silver hull they were painted on, as it drifted through space. The name itself rang with elegance, luxury, and grandeur. Like some ancient, exotic goddess born unto the stars... Her name whispered by the cosmos themselves, and resounding for all eternity... Carmenta Illustria...<p>

The gem of Citadel Space they call her. Flagship of Lycuna's Cruise Liners. A modern marvel of Asari engineering, and galaxy wide refinement, rivaling any dreadnought with its magnificent size.

The ship itself looked almost sea fairing " like the vessels that would take to the seas on Earth, perhaps merely for aesthetic purposes. The top half of the ship was speckled with lights and dark spots, marking the various windows, port holes, corridors, and observation decks. Two massive thrusters on either side of the vessel's hull accounted for its primary mode of propulsion. Accompanied by a pair of smaller twin engines at the stern of the ship, and one small one on the underbelly of its hull.

A decorative dorsal fin adorned the roof of the ship. And the bow was painted with diagonal stripes, in vibrant shades of blue and orange " Lycuna's trademark signature for the ships in their luxury fleet. And on the starboard side of the vessel, near the bow, the black silhouette of a seductive figured Asari, sitting in a provocative pose, graced the hull directly beneath the ship's printed, majestic name... Carmenta Illustria...

Blinding beams of light blazed across the smoke filled room... Or fog filled room, rather. Beams of every color of the perceivable spectrum shone, and danced around in perfect synchronous harmony with the thriving rhythm of the blaring music.

A blanket of fog covered the floor, as patrons of every race and walk of life moved their bodies to the rushing beat - kicking up smoke as they glided around the dark, strobing room. The easiest to pick out were the luminescent bodied Hanar, shining as they wiggled around the dance floor.

It was a room without walls, at least none that were readily discernible. Instead, theater like screens exhibiting a plethora of upbeat, electrifying scenery, encompassed most of the club. Everything from rich, abstract imagery, to the intense visage of fast dancing, flexible Asari.

A heavy beat... A fast rhythm... Adrenaline surges... Endorphins flare... A kaleidoscope of bright lights, colorful lasers, and vivid

holograms sway and cavort through the air. And at the center of the room, a lone synthetic amidst a sea of organics dominates the dance floor!

"Wooo! You go, mean machine!" Yeoman Kelly Chambers shouted over the music, as she danced near Legion, donned in a tight, thigh cut, black leather outfit.

Too busy to actually placate her with a response, Legion simply kept motoring around the dance floor. His feet glided, his arms waved, and he flowed across the club in a very mechanical, yet smooth fashion. Liquid metal in its purest form.

"Wow...! I never knew Geth were such great dancers!" A human woman in a backless, red top, and high cut skirt shouted to Kelly, as they all continued to dance.

"This one is!" Kelly answered, as she swung herself around, throwing her hands up over her head, to the beat of the music. "You should see 'em tear up the clubs on the Citadel!"

The woman smiled, and casually began dancing her way over towards Legion, as the high tempo beat crescendoed.

"Hi!" The scarlet bloused woman eagerly yelled out over the music, as Legion twirled around " his bright, optic sensor coming to shine upon her.

"What's your name?" She asked with a sly smile, causing a few mechanical components within the geth's head to motor back in forth in befuddlement.

* * *

><p>As Legion found himself in an unprecedented flirtatious confrontation, elsewhere the sun's gentle rays beamed down from above, bathing the Lido deck of the ship in its warming glow. Puffy white clouds drifted ever so slowly, against a clear blue sky. And palm trees, and other exotic, alien flora swayed back and forth against the gentle breeze of the wind.<p>

The simulation was perfect. A warm summer day, on an exotic beach somewhere. Of course the sunlight was generated by a massive, glowing lamp that hung suspended over the Lido deck's main pool. And the clouds, and the trees were nothing more than a convincing projection encompassing the deck, as soothing sounds of the wind, and the tide washing ashore played from cleverly hidden speakers.

Still, it was as close as one could possibly get to the real thing, while drifting through space on the most luxurious barge in the galaxy, without actually being there.

"Yep... Yep, yep..." Joker remarked arrogantly, sitting at a small bar, sipping a cocktail, as three voluptuous figured women sat around him, enthralled. "So anyway, that's how I was able to stop the Reapers... Wasn't easy... Broke my collar bone in the process." He said, as he pointed at the thick, metallic brace around his neck, attached to two metallic supports draped across his shoulders. "But that's the price you pay for bein' a hero..."

Joker sat, leaning with his back against the bar, wearing a light gray tank-top, a dark blue pair of trunks, a pair of black rubber sandals, and all the while still donned in his black and white SR-2 uniform cap. The three curvacious women sat on either side of him, completely captivated. A dark skin brunette, with short, curly hair, in a tight fitting, black, one-piece bathing suit. A light blue skinned Asari, with pink markings over her fringes, in a pink bikini. And a fair skinned, human blonde, in a red bikini, twirling her long hair into curls, with her fingers, as they continued to listen to the helmsman spin his tall tale.

"Commander Shepard gets most of the credit, I know..." He brashly continued. "He tends to be the Alliance's poster boy. And I let 'em. I don't mind... But if you're gonna defeat a fleet of Reapers... It takes a REAL ship in the hands of a REAL pilot. Hmph... That's where this guy comes in..." He asserted, as he pointed a confident pair of thumbs at himself.

As Joker continued to proudly regale his newfound lady friends with exaggerated stories, a shirtless, muscular, Jacob strutted through the lounging area around the pool, watchfully.

He wore a pair of black swim trunks, with an orange and white stripe running down each leg. And his arms swung freely at his sides, despite a layered bandage wrapped around the rounded corner of his left shoulder.

The pool itself was quite considerable. A round pool, about half a football field's length in diameter. On one end, three diving boards, each taller than the last, allowed jumpers to showcase their moves... skillful or otherwise. And on the other end, a towering silly straw of a water slide, looped, swooped, and spiraled "allowing children, and the more playful adults to crash into the water with a splash.

A collage of lifeforms relaxed by the pool, and took to the water, as Jacob spotted an empty lounge chair beside an enticing opportunity.

With a slick grin, and a confident look, he casually strolled over to her. A curvacious redhead - her tanned skin glistening in the artificial sun, after a refreshing swim.

"Well..." Jacob began in a very smooth tone of voice, sliding himself on his side, onto the empty lounge chair. "Look at this..."

The woman turned her head ever so slightly to look at Jacob; a less than impressed expression on her face.

"You know, I don't normally approach women like this... Heavy risk..." Jacob rolled the words off his tongue, as his eyes floated over her body, from top to bottom. "But the prize..."

"Ugh..." The woman scoffed, as she sneered her lips, and looked away, shunning the not so smooth operator. "In your dreams buddy..."

"In my dreams?" Jacob demanded, somewhat stunned at his rejection, as he sat up.

"You know what. Scratch that... Not EVEN in your dreams..."

"Not eve... Bu... Wha... " Jacob stuttered in wide eyed shock, as he attempted to comprehend the inconceivable turn of events that just transpired.

"No, not even in YOUR dreams, lady!" Jacob exclaimed, as he shot to his feet, causing the woman to simply roll her eyes indifferently. "You ain't exactly no super model, you know..."

"Yeah, whatever..." The young woman remarked sarcastically, shooing Jacob away with a delicate hand. "Just keep walkin' Mr. Risky Prize..."

"Shit... Didn't fight the damn Reapers... Ain't tell me to keep walkin'... This is Jacob Taylor you're talkin' too...!" He grumbled angrily to himself, as he walked away in a huff, towards the pool, where a hefty krogan knelt at the edge, dunking his head into the water.

"I been out in space too long, I'm losin' my touch..." He continued to mutter to himself, as he came up to Grunt, who was wearing some sort of casual, dark blue, and white, krogan fitted, padded nylon outfit "€" contrasting greatly to the bulky, silvery armor he normally wore.

"And what the hell are you doin'?" He demanded, angrily shaking his arms, as he watched the krogan clutch the edge of the pool with his hands, submerging his head, and waving it around rapidly.

As Grunt heard Jacob's muffled exclamation, he yanked his dripping wet head out, and turned to look up at his irate fellow crew member.

"Argh..." Grunt growled, with a mixture of anger, and frustration. "I'm uh... I'm fishing..."

"Fishing...!" Jacob beckoned, with a surprised laugh. "Okay, two things..." He said, holding a pair of fingers up to Grunt. "First... There's gotta be like fifty restaurants on this thing... And this is an all inclusive cruise, so you can eat all you want. Which... For you, I can imagine... Yeah..."

Jacob shrugged his shoulders, as he rolled his eyes, and continued. "And two... It's a pool! Not a lake... There's no fish in that water... Not unless you count the jellies..." He said, as he looked out into the pool, at the flowing tentacled Hanar.

"Bah...!" Grunt bellowed, as he stood up, shaking his head. "I saw the... clouds, and the sun... and the trees... I thought there might be fish... I'm tired of being fed! I want to fish... To hunt!" He exclaimed with a passion, as he shook two clenched fists out in front of him.

"I've had many great battles... But I was tank-bred... I've never known what it's like to stalk my own prey..."

"Yeah, well... We're gonna be on this ship a while, so get used to it..." Jacob replied, crossing his arms, and shrugging his shoulders.

"Grrrr... My kind was not meant to wallow in this pit of soft, overfed, weaklings!" Grunt shouted, as he turned and began pacing around restlessly, with his fists in the air. "I am a warrior! I am Kro-Whoa!"

The slippery edge of the pool suddenly took Grunt's feet right out from under him, as he paced around in a huff, sending him slamming hump first onto the floor, before rolling into the water with a massive splash.

"Puhhh! Ugh!" The krogan griped angrily, spewing water out of his mouth, as his thick, scaly head emerged.

"Victor!" A small human boy yelled out, blindly wading through the water nearby, as a small salarian child swam away, and took refuge behind Grunt.

"Manswell!" The adolescent salarian replied, sticking his head out from behind Grunt, then quickly popping back in.

"Vict... Huh...?" The brown haired little boy quickly opened his eyes, as he swam into something big, and firm - finding the hefty krogan in his path, looking down at him with mild annoyance.

"Uh... H-Hi, Mister..."

Grunt snorted and sneered a bit, as he lowered his head down to the child's level. "Do you hunt the other whelping?" He questioned, as he turned and looked at the small salarian, who looked on with a nervous smile - gliding his hands back and forth below the surface of the water, and kicking his feet to stay afloat.

"Uhm... Sorta..." The little boy responded timidly.

"Don't you know that a hunter is supposed to keep his senses keen? That means eyes open!" Grunt declared, a tad bit irate, as the small salarian swam over to his human friend - the two now floating alongside each other.

"Well, it's supposed to be a game..." The brown haired little boy answered. "Kinda like tag..."

"A game?"

"Yeah, you wanna play with us, Mister?" The tiny salarian replied eagerly. "It's a really fun human game, and it's real easy!"

"Grrr... I am a krogan..." Grunt grumbled a bit as he turned away, before turning back, put off by the idea, yet mysteriously intrigued. "Krogan's don't play games... We train... We hunt...!"

"Well, why not just try it?" The little human boy innocently beckoned. "You might like it. It's... kinda like hunting...?" He said questioningly, with a shrug of his shoulders.

"Yeah! And it's waaay funner with more people!" The salarian child eagerly added. "Here, we'll teach ya. See like, one person is 'it'. And they gotta find you. So every time they yell out 'Victor', you gotta yell out 'Manswell'. And you try to swim away without getting

caught! If they catch you, then you become 'it'. And if you think they're trying to climb outta the water, you can yell 'Fish outta water!' and they'll become it too."

"Fish?" Grunt exclaimed excitedly. "So there ARE fish in this water?" He shouted, as he peered through the surface, and sifted through the water with his hands.

"Uh, no... It's just part of the game, see?" The young salarian informed. "Look, it's easy. Danny'll be 'it'. And we'll try to get away from him. Every time he yells 'Victor', we yell 'Manswell'. And he'll try to catch us. Easy, right?"

Without answering, Grunt simply groaned a little under his breath, as his eyes rolled upward, although he didn't actually turn down the invitation to the boys' game.

"Kay, here we go. Ready?" Danny asked, closing his eyes, as his little salarian friend swam a few feet away.

"Ready!" The salarian child shouted.

The disgruntled krogan didn't bother to offer up any sort of response, acknowledging or otherwise. He simply stood there, shoulder deep in the shallow end of the pool, with a sour expression on his face.

"Victor!"

"Manswell!" The young salarian replied, as he zig zagged around the shallow water.

"MANSWELL!" Grunt let forth a mighty, bellowing roar in response, rippling the water in tiny waves around him, and causing little Danny to open his eyes wide, with a horrified look on his face.

When it was over, Danny began to let out a faint series of muffled, whelping sounds as his chin began to quiver. Just then, he clenched his little eyes shut, beginning to whimper and cry, as he quickly turned and swam away towards his friend.

"What?" Grunt demanded, as he watched the weepy little boy swim away. "What's the matter with you? Isn't that the way you said this childish game is played?"

"Mom!" Danny's salarian friend yelled out, as they quickly paddled away towards the side of the pool more populated with adults. "That mean krogan man made Danny cry!"

"Hahahahaha!" Grunt turned to find Jacob cackling tumultuously, with one arm across his ribs, as he pointed down at the krogan.

"Way to go, Grunt! Ahahaha!" Jacob continued, still laughing uncontrollably. "You really got a way with kids! Hey, did the water get any warmer? Hahahahaha!"

"Argh..." Grunt griped to himself, as he slowly let himself sink beneath the water.

As Jacob continued to shake his head, hunched over in stitches, a

familiar Salarian Scientist made his way across the Lido Deck, towards the pool.

Jacob's laughter slowly began to dwindle, as he looked up, with a big grin on his face, trying to catch his breath. That's when he unexpectedly caught sight of the Normandy's Science Officer, bringing a sudden, somewhat stunned countenance to his expression.

A pasty, pale skinned stick figure, with darker brown patches running down his back - Mordin strolled along casually, not showing the slightest sign of bashfulness, as he wore nothing but a tight fitting pair of black swim briefs, comparable to the size of a dinner napkin...

"Wow..." Jacob said to himself, in wide eyed shock at the speedo sporting Mordin, before clenching his eyes shut, and pressing his palm against his forehead. "I did not need to see that..."

* * *

><p>Thick, curved windows, making up half of the outside wall, and most of the ceiling, housed the lavish, wide open corridor â€" showcasing a breathtaking panoramic view of the stars streaking by outside.<p>

On the inside wall, hung beautiful works of art, illuminated by small lamps suspended overhead. Paintings of the abstract, or sunsets, and exotic landscapes. A majestic, blue spotted, four eyed creature, not unlike the horses from Earth, grazed serenely in a field of violet, wheat-like stalks.

Large, odd-shaped sculptures of metal and stone graced the black carpeted floor of the silvery corridor, intermittently. Along with small tables topped with colorful flora from across the galaxy.

"Or we could go dancing! Or swimming! Or maybe take in a show!" Tali exclaimed excitedly, as she walked briskly through the hallway, with her hands clasped in front of her, dragging a grinning Shepard in tow, as he struggled to keep up.

The enthusiastic quarian was dressed in her usual apparel. The same lavender colored veil, and enviro-suit that she usually wore. The only difference now being her lack of tools and armaments. No knife strapped to her ankle, not shotgun across her back, and no belt of utilities and implements around her waist.

Although the Commander shared her lack of ordnance, he on the other hand, was dressed uncharacteristically casual. In contrast to the dark gray and red N7 armor he normally wore, or the gray, black, and white Cerberus uniform he'd don between missions; he was dressed in a black felt jacket, worn over a dark gray shirt, and black pants leading down to his black, leather shoes.

"Or we could go down to the casinos! I used to love to play Quasar on the Citadel!"

"Tali, slow down!" Shepard said with a cheerful, yet exasperated laugh, as he grabbed her by the waist, and held on. "We've got nine days... We can do anything we want. We don't have to do it all on the first day."

She giggled a bit, placing her hands over his, around her stomach, as they rocked back and forth to a slow stop. When they did stop, still wrapped in his arms, she slowly turned herself around to face him, draping her hands on his shoulders.

"Can you blame me?" She questioned, her moon beam eyes glistening from behind her mask, as the tip of their foreheads met. "The Reapers are finally dead, and we're on a luxury cruise together. I'm a little... excited..." She said, as the two laughed, and held each other, while people walked past them back and forth, too engrossed in art appreciation to notice the couple.

"You know... I did bring my immuno-boosters. We could always just go back to the room..." She suggested in a hushed tone, as she softly stroked his shoulders.

"Mmm..." Shepard sighed a bit, finding the enticing notion hard to resist. "Let's wait a bit..." He answered, looking down at her with a warm smile. "I've got something very special planned, that we'll wanna celebrate..."

"Ooh, something special?" She beckoned, as a burly, uniformed man approached them, from the direction they were headed.

"Mmm-hmm..." Shepard replied, with a nod and a smile.

"What is it?"

"No, no... I'm not telling." He said, playfully turning his head, and looking away, with an exaggerated smug look on his face. "It's a surprise."

"Come on... Tell me!" Tali continued to plead playfully, as the uniformed figure reached them.

"Nope..."

"Tell me! Please...!"

"Ahem, Commander Shepard?" A deep ringing voice called out, interrupting the two engaged in playful banter.

Tali quickly turned, and stepped aside, revealing the decorated officer before them, as she came to stand beside Shepard.

He was a heavy set man, in his early to mid sixties. He had bushy eyebrows, and a short, brown, salt and pepper beard covering most of his chin line. He wore a black brimmed white naval cap, and a pristine white uniform, with nary the slightest blemish. It was lined with sterling golden bands, and four gleaming golden buttons running down his chest. And draped across his shoulders were twin, black epaulettes, each marked with a gleaming star, and four golden bands.

"Excuse me, I didn't mean to interrupt anything..." The man began with a hospitable grin, and a cheerful demeanor. "I'm Arthur Ryback, Captain of the *Illustria*." He informed, as he extended a hand towards the Commander.

"Oh, Captain!" Shepard replied, mildly surprised, as he quickly reciprocated the gesture, and the two shared a hearty handshake. "This is quite an unexpected surprise. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Oh, no..." Ryback replied, chuckling under his breath, as he shook his head. "No, believe me Commander, the pleasure, the privilege, and the honor is all mine. When my cruise director told me that THEE Commander Shepard was on board my ship, I just had to come and meet you personally."

"Well I'm flattered, Captain." Shepard said cordially, as the two released hands.

"This is my girlfriend, Tali'Zorah." He announced, as he placed an arm around her back, and introduced her. "My better half. She's been an indispensable member of my crew, and more, since before the Battle of the Citadel."

"An honor to meet you, Captain." Tali said, as she extended her own hand, and bowed slightly.

"As I said before, ma'am..." Ryback answered, reaching out for Tali's three fingered hand, grasping it, and gently turning it palm side down. "The honor... is mine..." With one hand tucked behind his back in a refined fashion, he slowly hunched over, and lightly kissed the back of Tali's hand.

"Oh..." Tali said in a mildly shy tone of voice, as the Captain released her hand, and stood back up. "Why... Thank you."

"This is a fine ship, Captain. A real marvel..." Shepard began, with his arm still around Tali, as passengers continued to walk past them, to and fro. "Although, I must say, if you'll excuse me, but it's somewhat surprising to see a human Captain on an asari owned cruise ship."

"Ah, yes..." The Captain said with a light sigh, as he nodded with his eyes closed. "I'm actually one of only two human Captains working for the Lycuna Cruise Line. A fact that I'm very proud of. I'm a former Alliance Navy man myself. Retired from active duty. And I suppose my service record went a long way in getting me this job..."

"I've been the Captain of the *Illustria* since it's maiden voyage..." Ryback continued, with a bit of lament in his voice. "She's been the finest ship in Lycuna's luxury fleet for nearly thirteen years now... The gem of Citadel Space... She'll be retiring in a couple of years, and I along with her..."

"Well, it's a fine vessel you command, Captain." Shepard assured, as he noticed a blue and black uniformed security officer walk by, with a heavy looking gun belt around his waist. "I'm sure she'll be true to the end."

"And I've noticed there's an awful lot of security on-board..." He continued, as the officer proceeded on, out of earshot. "More than I'd expect to see on a recreational cruise... Although this IS my first one..."

"Heh... Yeah, we get that sometimes..." Ryback responded, shrugging his shoulders with a laugh. "What you have to realize Commander, is we cater to some of the richest, most powerful people in the galaxy. The crème de la crème of galactic society. We've even had members of the Council book passage with us. The thing is many of our passengers bring their indentured servants along..."

Shepard nodded his head, with his teeth clenched, as he began to understand, though never having liked the concept of indentured servitude.

"Some courts across the galaxy actually enforce indentured servitude as a sentence for minor crimes such as theft, and vandalism, in lieu of jail time. That's where there can be a problem... But incidents are rare." The Captain continued to explain.

"Also, as with any vessel, there's always the possibility of attack by pirates or raiders. But that's unlikely in these parts. We don't travel beyond the confines of Citadel Space. And if anything like that WERE to ever happen, we've got the best private security force in the known galaxy. Commander Andrew Kim, my head of security, has been with me since the maiden voyage, and he runs a tight outfit."

"So yes, the heavy security may seem like a bit much, but necessary so that you and your lovely lady can enjoy the most relaxing, worry free vacation of your lives." The Captain declared with a wink and a confident grin.

"Well, thank you Captain." Tali replied cheerfully. "That's very reassuring."

"It sure is..." Shepard added.

"Which reminds me of why I came to find you in the first place..." Ryback continued, as he waved a finger at Shepard. "Are there other members of your team on board?"

"...Yeah." Shepard answered after a very brief silence. "Most of my crew is on-board."

"Whew..." Ryback let forth a sharp whistle, with a wide eyed expression. "Well that must've cost a small fortune."

"A large one actually... Luckily I'm not the one paying for it." Shepard affirmed with a snicker.

"Well Commander Shepard..." Captain Ryback continued, standing up straight, and placing one hand firmly behind his back. "I'd like to humbly invite you and your team to dine at the Captain's Table, in the main dinning hall this evening, on the Mezzanine Deck."

John and Tali stopped and looked at each other for a moment, as a small grin simultaneously crept in on each of their faces, before they turned back to face the Captain.

"We'd be delighted, Captain..." Shepard assured, gratefully.

"Splendid!" Ryback exclaimed, with a firm nod. "Then I'll see you

this evening." He said as he extended a friendly hand towards Shepard, who gladly returned the gesture."I look forward to meeting your team, and hearing the incredible tale of how you were able to stop that fleet of monsters."

* * *

><p>Even though the room was dimly lit, it still radiated elegance. Just by a mere glance, one could tell that it was one of the finer luxury suites on-board. Elegant, hand-painted cream colored wallpaper canvased the rooms, accented by exquisite, hand-carved wood molding.<p>

Thick, ivory colored pillars, in the winding, twisting shape of a rope, wrapped in golden bands, stretched from the floor to the ceiling of every corner of the room.

A beautiful chandelier, with thousands of fine cut, glass droplets chimed with a soft melody, as it lightly swayed in the air conditioner's gentle breeze, over the main sitting area.

The gold lined, arch shaped doorways were each adorned with dark brown, shimmering, silk curtains, wrapped in a golden tassel.

And on the king sized bed, beneath the oval shaped skylight exhibiting the streaking stars outside, a physicist, and an operative laying together began to stir...

"...Good morning..." Miranda said in a soft, tender tone, with her head resting on Gordon's shoulder, and her arm draped across his chest.

They laid nuzzled closely together in the center of the large bed, with a smooth, dark brown, silk sheet draped over them, up to their bare shoulders.

"Mmm... Is it morning?" Gordon asked in a bit of a groggy voice, as he stretched himself out a bit, and drew his arm around Miranda's back and shoulder.

"Well, it is somewhere..." She said with a titter.

The long strands of her silky, perfumed, black hair blanked half her pillow, and most of his shoulder, as they cuddled together. Gordon held an uncharacteristically wide grin on his face, as he relaxed with his eyes closed, gently caressing her shoulders, with his black-rimmed glasses no where to be found.

"You know, it's incredible..." Gordon uttered in a tone slightly more than a whisper, as he opened his eyes, and starred at the ceiling.

"hmm, what is?"

"It's just..." Gordon paused for a moment, as he began. "Well, I can hardly believe it... For the first time, since I can remember... There's no danger, no war... No... No looming threat, or... impending battle... There's just..." Gordon shifted his head on the pillow, and gazed into Miranda's dusky hue swept eyes. "Just you and me... Here... now..."

"Hmhmhm..." Miranda giggled a bit under her breath, as she sat up a bit, and leaned over, across Gordon.

"Are you afraid you're going to wake up any minute?" She asked, before quickly pressing her lips against his.

"Hehehe..." Gordon laughed a bit, as she kept her forehead, and nose pressed against his. "Well I would..." He said, as his lips became occupied with another quick kiss. "But my dreams..." He continued, before receiving another. "Are never this good..." And another.

"Mmm... Better than a dream, huh?" Miranda said, as she laid herself back down beside him.

"You could say that..." Gordon uttered with a sly smile.

"Well, we've got nine days all to ourselves..." She declared, in a seductive tone, as she began doodling little circles on Gordon's chest, with her finger. "What do you wanna do now...?"

* * *

><p>"Awww that's it... Oh, that fe... Oh! Ooh! L-Lower, lower... Yeah... Yeah, right there... Mmm... that feel's so good..."<p>

"You're so tense!" An asari masseuse declared, as she ran her hands down Garrus' back in a firm, yet delicate manner. "I've never worked on such tight knots..."

Garrus relaxed on a long, padded table, resting his head sideways on his crossed arms, as he was gently rocked back and forth. He was covered from his waist, down to his ankles with a long, white towel, as the masseuse worked her hands over his thick skin, and around his gaunt build.

The Asari wore white pants, and a plain, blue uniform shirt with a name tag that read: Nelyna. She had dark blue skin, which was somewhat lighter over her face, and white stripes running along the fringes of her head.

The scent of lavender, vanilla, and other foreign, yet enchanting aroma's wafted through the air â€" likely from the assortment of candles on the shelves around the room. Gentle music played from a hidden speaker, somewhere â€" accompanied by the soothing sounds of running water from the small fountain in the corner.

"Mmm... That's what happens when you're part of the team that took down the Reapers..." Garrus replied in a voice mired by a series of delighted groans, as Nelyna rubbed the softer flesh around his neck, within the boney brim surrounding the turian's shoulders.

"That's such an amazing story..." She declared with great admiration, as she continued her work. "I never would've believed it if I hadn't seen you in the news vids myself..."

"Ye... oooh! Ahhh... Yeah, it was rough, but we pulled it off..." Garrus continued, still groaning pleasurably at the Asari's soothing

touch. "But enough about me... Why don't you tell me a little about yourself..."

"Well, there's not much to tell, really..." Nelyna explained, as she continued to sensually dig her fingers into the Turian's thick tissue. "I used to work for the consort on the Citadel, before I started here."

"You used to work for Sha'ira?" Garrus asked, a bit surprised as he raised his head off the table slightly.

"Yes. I was one of her acolytes." Nelyna continued. "Each of us possessed unique abilities so as to fulfill the needs of her clients. Some soothed with song, and others with conversation. My specialty has always been touch..." Nelyna smiled "â€" reminiscing, as she continued to rub down the turian.

"My fingertips can find every tension point in your body... And relieve it."

"Mmmmm... And how..." Garrus uttered in a state of euphoric bliss.

"So anyway..." Nelyna started again, as her adept fingers began working Garrus' lower back. "When scandals started surfacing about Sha'ira, it became harder and harder for her to keep her client list.. People used to have to book months in advance just to see her... But it got to the point that she wouldn't have any appointments for days at a time..."

"So..." She said with a hefty sigh under her breath. "When she closed up shop, I found myself looking for a new career... Luckily, I had managed to gather a wealth of references, and well... Here I am..."

"Ahhh..." Garrus sighed contently, as his tensions melted away. "Uh-ell, do you like it here?"

"Oh, I love it here!" Nelyna answered cheerfully. "Sure, there are things I miss about working with the Consort, but here I get to travel the galaxy, and see a lot of fascinating places. Plus, many of the clients I meet here are people I tended to on the Citadel..."

"Well you sure are good with your hands, Nelyna..." Garrus slurred a bit, nearly drifting off into peaceful sleep. "I tell you, I could stay here all day..."

"Aw, well unfortunately my shift is just about up..." She replied, as a light series of muffled thuds could be heard, steadily growing louder.

"But Xernac can take over for me, he should be here any minute." Nelyna continued - the thud's steadily growing louder as Garrus suddenly opened wide, his eyes. "In fact, I think I hear him coming now..."

"Uh... Who's Xernac?"

No sooner had he asked, than the metallic door to the massage parlor

breezed open, and in he walked with a thundering set of footsteps.

"Delighted Greeting. Nelyna. How good it is to see you..." A massive Elcor declared in a monotonous voice, as he walked in, wearing an Elcor variant of the blue and white uniform the Asari was wearing, draped across his back.

"Uhh..." The wide eyed Garrus simply laid there with his mouth agape.

"Hi, Xernac!" Nelyna exclaimed gleefully, as she continued to rub his back. "This is Garrus. I'm just about finished with him, but he wants to continue his massage treatment."

"Uhh..."

"Jovial Greeting. It is a pleasure to meet you, Garrus." The hefty Elcor declared, as he walked past the massage table. "Sincere eagerness. I will be with you in just a moment." He said, as he stomped into a back room.

"Well, I think that about does it." Nelyna assured, as she pulled her hands away.

"Uh, w-wai-wait a minute, you're leaving?" Garrus beckoned nervously, as he lifted his head, and pushed himself away from the table.

"Yeah, my shift is up. But don't worry, Xernac is fantastic!" The Asari declared, as she opened a nearby closet door to grab a thin coat on a hook. "You're in very good hands... Or feet... Or whatever, hehehe!" She giggled, with a shrug of her shoulders, as turned back towards Garrus.

"...Yeah, but..."

Just then, the omni-tool on Garrus' forearm lit up, with an abrupt pair of beeps, indicating an incoming call. Garrus sat himself up on the table, draping the towel around his waist, as he raised his arm up.

"Garrus?" Shepard's voice resonated from the bright orange hologram, as Xernac clomped back into the room. And as he stepped out, he and Nelyna stopped and shared a brief word in passing, as she headed towards the door.

"Yeah, Shepard. I'm here."

"Hey, I just wanted to let you know that we've been invited to dinner at the Captain's table this evening." Shepard's voice informed. "Eight p.m. sharp, standard Lycuna time, in the ship's main dinning hall."

"Oh!" Garrus exclaimed, as a relieved grin crept in on his face. "Yeah, sure! Thanks for telling me. I'll be there!"

"Alright, see you then." Shepard replied, as the hologram faded from Garrus' arm.

"Well..." Garrus began, with a forced, fraudulent disappointment in his voice, as he turned towards Xernac. "Wouldn't you know it, dash it all, I'm gonna have to take a rain check... You know, duty calls, important people to meet, and whatnot..."

"With disappointment. That is a shame..." The humdrum Xernac replied, as Garrus popped off the table, firmly wrapping the towel around his waist, and tucking the ends into each other. "But feel free to come back any time... We are always happy to serve you..."

"Uh... Yeah, you bet!" Garrus remarked awkwardly, as he quickly grabbed his folded garments out of the bin at the end of the table, and quickly made for the door without a second thought.

* * *

><p>"Alright. We'll be there, Commander. Thank you" Miranda spoke into her illuminated omni-tool, as she sat up on the bed beside Gordon.<p>

"Well..." Gordon began with a slightly dwindled smile, as her omni-tool disappeared. "So much for a nice evening alone together..."

"Yeah..." Miranda concurred with a defeated sigh, as she clenched her lips a bit. "Although..." She turned to Gordon, with a 'come on' look in her eyes. "We do have a little time before dinner..."

"Yeah...?" The intrigued physicist asked, as the slick grin on his face grew.

"Mmhmm..." Miranda assured, alluringly.

There was a brief silence between the two, as they simply stared at one another for a moment. Just then, all of a sudden, they tossed themselves back down on the bed, got close, and flung the brown silk sheets over their heads, as Miranda giggled lightly from underneath.

* * *

><p>Author's Note: Well, here it is. Chapter 1 of Episode I. Part of the 4 part Episodes that will eventually lead straight to the sequel.

_Don't expect these to be too serious, or emotional. They will be considerably more lighthearted than the main story, and the sequel I have planned. _

_I actually struggled A LOT to write this chapter, and I'm sure I'll struggle in the future as well. This sees the characters in EXTREMELY casual environments. The Celebrations and enjoyment after victory that you didn't really get to see at the end of Salvation too much. So you might see the characters acting a bit OUT of character, since you don't really see this level of relaxation in the games. Don't know how they react in casual environments. I did my best. _

_Please note that these episodes, and the sequel will take place following the continuity and storyline that I established with Salvation 1. Meaning that they are OUTSIDE of the Mass Effect 3

continuity. Mass Effect 3 never happened in the Salvation Universe, tho I may make slight references to it here and there. _

P.S. As far as the Gordon and Miranda scene(s) go... I'll never write an actual sex scene, but I've got no problem alluding heavily to it. And hey... After all the Doc's been through, he deserved to get him some! ;)

At any rate, enjoy!

2. Chapter 2: The Captain's Table Part I

****Salvation: Episode I â€” The Taking of the Carmenta Illustria**

>Disclaimer: This fan-fiction is part of an episodic series taking place after Salvation: A Half-Life/Mass Effect Universe Fan Fiction, which will lead directly to its sequel, Salvation II: Project Prometheus. These episodes and sequel take place OUTSIDE of the Mass Effect 3 continuity. Characters property of their respective companies, Half-Life created by Valve and Mass Effect created by Bioware.

****Chapter 2: The Captain's Table (Part I)****

****Your Guests Have Begun to Arrive...****

"Good evening, Qespar eis Qespalen." An asari, in a formal, white uniform, cordially greeted, as she opened the elegant, wooden door, to the great dinning hall.

"Good evening." Commander John Shepard replied with a grin, and a nod, as he stepped in, with a lovely quarian on his arm.

The moment they walked in, neither of them were able to help themselves from stopping to behold the sight of the lavish dinning hall. Immediately upon entering, there was a short flight of rounded steps, leading down to a large atrium, where many of the other passengers stopped to mingle â€” likely telling stories of their great wealth and monetary power.

The stone walls of the atrium glistened with running water, and at the center sat a beautiful rock garden, in the middle of a man-made pond. The circle shaped atrium allowed passage on either side of the pond, which led directly into the main dinning area.

Even from where they stood, Tali and Shepard could see its lustrous opulence. Towering ivory columns. Diamond chandeliers hanging down from the lofty ceiling. Lush, ruby silk curtains over every passageway. Shimmering, white satin table cloths draped over every table. All against a backdrop of starlight, as a towering, panoramic window made up most of the back wall.

"Keelah..." An awestruck Tali uttered, as they stood at top of the short flight of stairs, looking in. "In all my wildest dreams... I never imagined there could be such a place... I doubt very many of my people have ever been anywhere like this."

"You deserve all this and more, Tali..." Shepard said tenderly, as they began to descend into the atrium.

Tali smiled under her mask, and squeezed his arm tightly, as they reached the sparkling, black marble floor.

"I think we're under dressed..." She added, with a nervous undertone, as she looked around at some of the other patrons. "The Captain didn't mention this was a formal affair. I would've actually worn something nice..."

As opposed to the people they walked by, sporting the latest designer fashions of cocktail dresses, formal suits, and luxury apparel, Tali simply wore her normal, everyday attire. A bright, violet faceplate, shrouded by a decorative, lavender veil. Under which were gold colored bands around her neck, topping off her black, and lavender enviro-suit.

The Commander wore a loose fitting, casual, black jacket, thrown over a dark red dress shirt, and a pair of black pants.

"Eh, so what?" He nonchalantly replied, as they continued on through the atrium. "We're not here to hobnob with the rich and famous." He scoffed a bit, under his breath, giving her license to relax, and do the same.

"Hey Shepard!" A familiar voice suddenly called out, from behind.

The two turned around to spot the Normandy's skillful helmsman, slowly descending the stairs "taking each step, one at a time, with special care.

As he reached the bottom, his pace quickened a bit, but he still maintained a cautious speed. He wore a white, long-sleeved dress shirt, decorated with very fine, vertical, black stripes, khaki colored pants, and black shoes. He still wore the metallic brace around his neck. And to top it all off, the most unusual feature of his wardrobe, was the out of place SR-2 cap still resting on his head.

"Hey, Joker. Glad you could make it." Shepard greeted cheerfully, as Joker caught up with them. "How are you enjoying the vacation so far?"

"Yeah, it's great Commander..." Joker assured with a tinge of nervous agitation in his voice. "But I'm uh... not sure why you invited me to this. I mean I'm... not really... part of your combat team, or anything..."

Shepard stopped, and turned to Joker, shaking his head with a consoling grin on his face.

"Joker..." He began adamantly, as he placed a hand over the helmsman's shoulder. "If it hadn't been for you, we never would've made it to the Conduit on Ilos in time, we never would've made it into or out of the Collector base, and we never would've reached the vort's control room... You're as much a member of my team as anyone."

Joker tittered softly, and bowed his head a bit, with somewhat of a bashful smile on his face. "Thanks Commander..."

"I'm only sorry I couldn't invite the whole crew to this thing." Shepard continued, shrugging his shoulders, as he pulled his hand off Joker's. "But it is just one table, after all..."

"Heh, yeah..."

"Just one thing, though..." Shepard continued. "We're not on the Normandy, so uh... lose the lid." He instructed, as he lightly flicked the brim of Joker's cap up, with his finger.

"Oh! Yeah! Right..." Joker mumbled, as he yanked the cap off his head, scrunched it up in one hand, and quickly began trying to brush his messed hair back with the other.

"Good evening!" An asari waitress cordially greeted, as the trio reached the entrance to the main dinning room. "May I see you to a table?"

"We were invited to dine at the Captain's table tonight." Shepard readily informed.

"Oh... OH! My, yes! Commander Shepard, of course!" She exclaimed, in a gleeful outburst, when she suddenly realized who he was. "Right this way, please!"

She turned, and led the three into the lush dinning hall, which was even more extravagant close up. On the left of the large room, was a long, elegant bar — lit up with a cycling hue of abstract, holographic designs. And along its back wall, was a virtually boundless index of drinks and concoctions from every corner of the galaxy.

On their right, a band comprised of a drell, and two salarions in tuxedos, along with an asari in a white, flowing dress, played a lovely compilation of music, on a small stage. Whether it was an original composition, or something derived, who could say. Although to a human it would probably sound like something somewhere in between Antonio Vivaldi, and George Frideric Handel.

"You know, speaking of the Normandy, Commander..." Joker began again, following Tali and Shepard along, as their asari waitress weaved them around various tables of mingling, high society, bon vivants.

"It's a shame we couldn't bring EDI along, somehow." He continued. "It sucks that we had to leave her docked back at port, on Lycuna."

"I agree, Joker. But it's not like we can lug an entire frigate around on a cruise." Shepard replied, as they proceeded forward. "Besides, she's in hibernate mode. She won't even miss us."

"Yeah..." Joker said with a bit of a sigh, as they were led to a long table — the largest one in the room, near the towering, panoramic window at the back. "But we should really try to come up with something more portable for her."

"Heh..." Shepard chuckled lightly. "Grown pretty fond of her, eh?"

"Uh... Nah, I just think it'd be kinda... cool to have her around, you know?"

"Here we are." The asari hostess eagerly declared, as they reached the head of the table, where the formally dressed Captain was already patiently waiting. "Captain Ryback, I'm happy to announce that your guests have begun to arrive."

Each high back chair at the table was virtually a throne unto itself. Ivory white colored seats, chiseled in beautifully curvacious patterns, padded in red satin cushions, backings, and armrests. And at each vacant place setting, rested a large, empty plate, surrounded by a neatly folded dark red napkin, and a number of eating utensils on either side. Rows of fine, crystal wine and beverage glasses ran along side an elegant floral candle centerpiece. And each plate was topped off with a digital menu.

"Ah, Commander!" The Captain quickly shot up from his seat, with an enthusiastic smile, and a welcoming disposition.

"First one in, last one out, even to dinner, I see!" Ryback said, with a laugh, as he and Shepard shared a sturdy handshake.

"Just fashionably early, Captain." Shepard retorted with a smooth grin.

As the two Commanding Officers of stature released grips, Captain Ryback turned to Tali, and smiled politely.

"Ma'am." He nodded cordially, as he bowed to kiss the back of her hand once more.

"Captain." Tali replied, with a slight bow, almost a curtsy.

"Captain, this is my helmsman, Jeff Moreau." Shepard announced, as he stepped aside, and put an arm around Joker's shoulders, reluctantly coaxing him forward.

"Not to brag on his behalf... But he's the best pilot in Citadel Space, and the finest I've ever known..." He assured with a laugh, as he patted Joker on the back.

"Well he'd have to be, wouldn't he?" Captain Ryback declared, with a guttural chuckle. "How do you do, son?"

"Nice to meet ya, Captain." Joker replied, in a somewhat reserved tone of voice, as Ryback extended a large, calloused, hand towards him.

"Just... go easy with the handshake, sir..." He requested, as he reluctantly reached out, to reciprocate the gesture. "I've got uh... Vrolik Syndrome. Brittle bones..."

"Oh..." Ryback replied, mildly surprised, as he lightly gripped Joker's hand. "No worries, son. No worries." He said cheerfully, as they shook.

"But uhm, please... Please, sit!" He urged, pointing a hand out

toward the chairs along either side of the long, empty table. "I'm sure the rest of your crew will be arriving any moment."

"They better." Shepard said jokingly, causing the four to break out into light, mutual laughter, as Tali and John sat down on the Captain's right hand side, with Joker taking the first empty seat across from them.

* * *

><p>"How do people even wear this stuff?" Gordon griped, fidgeting with his collar, as he and Miranda stepped out of their state room.<p>

He wore a casual, tan-colored suit, with a light blue colored shirt underneath. Two dark blue stripes ran down the front of his jacket, with four silver buttons fastening it on either side. The modern day sports coat was accented with a white collar, twin, white circle patches on his shoulders, and white seams around his cuffs.

A bulky protrusion was visible on his left forearm, through his sleeve, and a silvery object gleamed from under the edge of his cuff, where he still wore his silvery, metallic cast.

And aside from the dramatic change to his wardrobe, from his usual armored apparel, there was also another thing missing. The black framed glasses that had come to be as recognizable to his personage, as his iconic crowbar, were no where to be found. In their place, he still wore a blue, holographic, targeting visor " likely indicative that he had yet been unable to have his now antiquated, damaged spectacles repaired.

"And I thought I had it bad when they made us wear those ridiculous ties at Black Mesa..." Gordon continued, as he finished adjusting his collar.

As their door slid shut behind them, Miranda ran her omni-tool over a green, holographic panel, quickly causing it to change to a deterring red.

"Oh, you'll get used to it." She replied playfully, with a hint of cynicism, as the two began down the long, lavish corridor with a brisk pace. "Come on, we're running late."

Miranda wore a sleek, velvety, dark blue dress, which despite being rather conservative, still managed to show off her curvacious figure, perfectly. It was layered with a dark red patch, running down the front, the entire length of the dress, and was finished with long sleeves of the same color.

As they walked down the mildly lit hallway, littered with state room doors on either side, one of them unexpectedly slid open a few feet in front of them, and out stepped a stately salarman.

"Miranda. Dr. Freeman. Greetings." Mordin met, with a cheerful nod of his head, as he noticed the couple walking up to him.

"Ah, good evening Dr. Solus." Gordon expressed, as he joined them when they passed by, walking toward the elevators.

"Hello, Mordin." Miranda also greeted, with a subtle smile. "I see you're running late as well."

"Yes, but happy to have caught you." Mordin replied, as the three continued along. "Wanted to talk. Medical matters."

"Medical matters?" Gordon inquired, worriedly.

"Yes." The salarian casually continued. "Cruise is... intended to be pleasurable. Different species react differently to recreation."

Gordon turned to look at Mordin, with a confused, inquiring look in his eyes - completely at a loss for what he was talking about.

"Oh no...": Miranda grumbled to herself, shaking her head, and draping her hand over her eyes, as they continued forward.

"Aware that the two of you are sexually active. Or planning to be... Suggest caution."

Gordon raised a stunned eyebrow behind his visor, as they reached the elevator door. Miranda quickly reached out, and pressed the button to call the elevator, as she rolled her eyes irritably, before bringing her hand right back over them, and shaking her head.

"Biotic ability can prove dangerous during intercourse." Mordin seamlessly continued his presumptuous lecture. "Over stimulation. Loss of emotional, and mental control. Elation, exhilaration, euphoria. All can prove hazardous."

"Uh..." Gordon stood with a dumbfounded gaze, at a complete and utter loss for words.

"Ugh, thank you, Mordin..." Miranda expressed sarcastically, with an irate groan, and a hard glare. "But I'm MORE than capable of controlling my biotics..."

"Of course. Hormones..." Mordin replied, with a casual shrug of his shoulders. "Will be here to set broken bones later."

"Still. Wanted to offer advice." He continued. "Can give biotic inhibitor to dampen neural receptors. Weaken unintentional biotic effects. No guarantees... Suggest padding walls."

"Oh god... get out of here!" Miranda screamed in her head, fighting back the urge to splatter the salarian against the wall, as she tapped her forehead with her index finger repeatedly, with her eyes clenched shut.

"What in the hell..." Was the main thought that echoed through Gordon's mind, as he stood there, forcing a crooked grin, as the light on the elevator neared their floor. "He can't be serious... Can he...?"

"Biotic ability also gives benefit." The tactless salarian continued. "Can forward booklet to your omni-tool. Includes diagrams, exercises, inventive uses of mass effect fields. Can supply oils or ointments to reduce discomfort." He assured, as he materialized his omni-tool, and

began punching in a varying set of keys. "Can also provide electronic relationship aid demonstration vids to use as necessary, upon request."

"Hahahaha!" Gordon suddenly broke out into an unrestrained laugh. "Wait! Wait! Wait! Wait!" He exclaimed, tittering and trying to catch his breath, as he held a hand up to Mordin, and shook his head in disbelief. "You're kidding about all this, right?"

"He's kidding!" Gordon proclaimed assuredly, still chuckling nervously, as he turned to face Miranda.

"No, I'm afraid he's not..." Miranda submitted, with a long, drawn-out sigh.

"Shocking suggestion..." Mordin immediately stopped working on his omni-tool, however still holding it out in front of him, as he turned to Gordon with a dignified stance. "Doctor, patient confidentially a sacred trust! Would never dream... of mockery..."

The stunned and confused countenance returned to Freeman's face, as Mordin went back to work on his omni-tool.

"...But this isn't exactly the time or the the place to be..."

Before he could finish, Gordon's omni-tool lit up with a screen exhibiting a series of... suggestive, albeit informative diagrams, just as the elevator's door slid open, with a chime.

"Oh! Uhm!" Gordon exclaimed, flustered, as he quickly punched away at his omni-tool, feverishly trying to subside the explicit reading material, as two passenger couples stepped off the elevator, and looked on with suspicion.

"Hehe... G-Good evening..." He chuckled nervously, forcing an idiotic grin, after simply giving up, and placing his hologram covered arm behind his back, as the two couples passed them by.

Miranda rushed into the elevator, swiftly followed by Gordon, who quickly brought his omni-tool forward, and began fidgeting with it once more. Mordin casually strolled in, with a content grin on his face, as the elevator door slowly slid shut behind them.

"Solus! You have got to be the most crude! Boorish! Tactless salarian that has ever...!"

"Hey, you know..." Gordon unexpectedly interjected, interrupting Miranda's admonishment, as he studied the material on his omni-tool. "Some of this actually looks pretty uh... interesting." He looked up at Miranda, and shrugged his shoulders. "...Speaking purely from a scientific point of view, of course..."

"Oh, don't YOU start!"

* * *

><p>A pair of asari waitresses laid a colorfully delectable assortment of appetizers and Hors d'oeuvres out, over the table. There were recognizable human classics, such as cocktail shrimp,

pÃ¢tÃ©s, terrines, and caviar... At least, one might assume it was caviar from the look of it. But there were also various other... exotic looking dishes - clearly not of human conception. Among them was a platter of tiny morsels that resembled blue, and green deviled eggs, and something that looked like oysters, only on a much more beautifully complex shell than any Earthly mollusk ever had... Exotic, but delectable nonetheless. An exquisite array of gourmet delicacies from across the galaxy, to appease the few already sitting at the table, as the Commander prepared to announce a familiar turian.<p>

"Captain, this is one of my oldest friends, Garrus Vakarian." He introduced from his seat, as Garrus walked up toward the head of the table.

The formerly empty chair on Joker's left had now been occupied by Jacob, who conversed lightly with the helmsman, as they skimmed through their digital menus, likely talking about what sounded good.

"Garrus, like Tali, was part of my original crew who helped me track down Saren." Shepard continued. "And he's one hell of a deadly shot."

Garrus, who was clad in a casual, blue and gray turian ensemble, approached the Captain, with a hand extended, as Ryback stood to greet him in turn.

"Good to meet you, Captain." Garrus declared earnestly, as the two shared a firm gripped handshake. "This is quite a ship you've got here."

"Thank you. Thank you." Ryback graciously expressed. "She's a bit over the hill, but she's still the finest luxury liner ever built." He affirmed, as the two released their grip, and he slowly sat back down.

Before Garrus could walk away to find a seat, the Captain took a long hard look at him, waving a pointed finger at him, with something gnawing at his mind.

"Vakarian..." Ryback uttered. "Tell me, you wouldn't by any chance be related to the great Vyrnus Vakarian, of C-Sec, would you?"

Garrus grinned, and laughed to himself, as he bowed his head and nodded, before looking back up.

"Yeah. He's my father."

"No kidding!" The Captain exclaimed, in happy disbelief. "Son of the great detective himself!" Just then, the Captain's delight suddenly faded â€" replaced by a look of concern. "H-How is your father...? Heaven forbid he was a casualty..."

"No, no..." Garrus quickly refuted, putting a hand up, and shaking his head â€" laying the Captain's concerns to rest. "No, he's alright. I spoke to him before the cruise." He explained, as he made his way toward the empty seat on Tali's right.

"After the Alliance evacuated the Citadel, he volunteered himself as

a hand, on-board the Anchorage, during the battle... After it was over, he helped with the relief effort on Earth, up until two days ago. Now he's back on the Citadel, helping citizens get re-settled.."

"He sounds like a great man..." The Captain reverently admitted, as Garrus sat down. "I suppose it runs in the family. He must be very proud."

"He's had some... reservations... about me working with a Spectre..." Garrus snickered, as he leaned forward briefly, to look at Shepard, sitting on Tali's other side. "He's never really cared for 'em. Though I think he'd make an exception in Shepard's case. And he's too prideful to come right out and say it, but..." Garrus paused for a bit. A grin grew on his face, as he nodded to himself, before he turned his attention back to Ryback. "Yeah... I think I did him proud..."

The Captain sat enthralled â€" resting his chin on his clasped hands, as a young, human woman quickly approached the table.

She wore a tightly fitting, dark green dress, adorned with light green, and white floral patterns. She had eyes of sapphire blue, a fair complexion, and golden blonde hair, at a length just shy of her shoulders.

"Excuse me, Captain!" The young lady eagerly began, with a starry eyed grin, and an overly enthusiastic tone, as she stepped around to the corner of the table between Ryback, and Shepard. "I hope I'm not interrupting anything. I don't meant to impose, but I simply HAD to come by, and meet the great Commander Shepard!"

She leaned forward onto the table, gripping the edge with her hands, as she eyed the Commander from top to bottom. Shepard looked back, examining the woman, with an averse stare. There was something odd about her gaze... about her smile. It didn't seem quite sincere, or genuine. She had the guise of someone putting on an act.

"Ooh..." She began flirtatiously, as she placed one hand on Shepard's shoulder, and ran it down his arm, while keeping the other one gripped under the edge of the table. "The vids don't do you justice. You're even stronger looking in person..."

"Excuse me, but can I help you...?" The affronted Commander demanded, pulling his arm away, as Tali clenched her fists â€" starring a hole right through the impetuous woman.

"Eheh..." She grinned, and laughed nervously, as she put her hand away. "Sorry, I forgot to introduce myself. My name is Cameron McClane. I just... I'm just such a huge fan! I wanted to meet you personally... You know, we're all just so grateful of everything you did for the galaxy... Saving us all from the Reapers... It's... Well it's impressive, beyond words..." She spoke with an alluring tone, and a beguiling gaze.

"Well Miss, you've had you're meeting..." Captain Ryback chimed in, with a stern tone, as he took note of the awkward situation. "So I must now ask you to leave. This is the Captain's Table after all, and I'm afraid it's invite only..."

"Of course, Captain..." The brash young lady conceded, bowing her head, as she stood up from her leaned position. As she pulled her hand away from under the table, she left a small, round device, about the size of a bottle cap, strategically adhered to its underside.

"I do apologize. I'll take my leave now."

"Good..." Tali added calmly, yet noticeably irate. "I'm sure there are plenty of men on-board dying for you to seduce them out of their fortunes... Don't wanna keep them waiting."

Cameron simply looked back at Tali with a cynical smile, before returning her attention to Shepard.

"Well... If you decide you wanna talk. I'll be close by..." She said in a hushed, bewitching tone - still eying the Commander with an inviting gaze. "I'd love to hear your story, and... maybe get the chance to show you just how grateful I really am..."

"I doubt it..." Shepard retorted, with a smug grin.

Seemingly unaffected, McClane gave a very brief shrug of her shoulders, as she closed her eyes, held her head up in a dignified fashion, and turned to walk away - swaying her hips from side to side.

After a short distance, she turned and had a seat at one of the surrounding tables. She quickly opened a small handbag she had with her, and pulled out a tiny earpiece device. She switched it on, hooked it around her ear, and slid the bud into the canal.

"Talk about the gall on that one!" She heard the turian exclaim, through the receiver, as she turned to look back at the Captain's table, just in time to see the lot break out into laughter.

"Well that was awkward..." Shepard's voice declared. "I thought she'd never leave..."

"I thought Tali was gonna make her..." Jacob's voice replied, with a snicker.

"Oh believe me, I was really hoping I'd get to..." Tali added.

"Damn!" The young lady griped through her teeth, with a scowl on her face, as she listened. "The flirty routine never works..."

* * *

><p>The exquisitely crafted wooden door swung shut behind Mordin, as the asari attendant granted him entry.<p>

"There are a LOT of people in there..." Gordon uttered, stopping dead in his tracks, just shy of the door, as he peered in through the crystalline glass windows.

An unpleasant apprehension settled into the pit of his stomach, as he took a small step back.

"Why are you so nervous?" Miranda beckoned, with a slight titter

under her breath, surprised, as she watched her physicist's agitated condition. "After everything we've been through, you're afraid of a little dinner engagement...?"

"I-I told you..." Gordon stuttered a bit, as he rubbed his forehead, above his visor's brim. "I don't like big gatherings, or social situations. Mostly, I've always just kept to myself..."

He turned to Miranda, and shrugged his shoulders with an edgy grin, as he spoke. "Why else do you think that in a facility full of other scientists, my best friend was a security guard...?"

"Don't worry..." Miranda assured in a hushed tone, as she draped her hands over Gordon's shoulders, and whispered in his ear. "Just stay close. I'll protect you..."

"Why don't you go ahead..." Gordon whispered back, jokingly.

"Oh, come on!" Miranda exclaimed, feigning annoyance, as she tugged at his arm, and hooked hers around it.

"Good evening, Qespar eis Qespalen." The asari at the door cordially greeted, as she opened it, and granted the two access into the lush dinning hall atrium.

"Good evening." "Good evening..." Miranda and Gordon both reciprocated, as they proceeded forward.

"What did she call us...?" Gordon asked in a whisper, as they descended the short, rounded flight of stairs.

"Qespar eis Qespalen." Miranda answered with a smile, as they reached the marble atrium floor. "It's asari for Sir and Madam."

"Oh, I see..." Gordon replied, raising his eyebrows understandingly. "Interesting."

"How was it again...?" He asked, as the two continued forward. "Qes... Qespan ein Qespacho...?"

"Hmhmhmhm..." Miranda giggled under her breath, as she leaned onto Gordon, and squeezed his arm a little tighter. "Something like that."

* * *

><p>"This is Dr. Modrin Solus, my team's Chief Science Officer." The Commander introduced, as Mordin came up to greet Ryback. "A brilliant scientist, and a very skilled former member of the Salarian Special Tasks Group, who also tends to take the role of our field medic when the situation calls for it."<p>

As Shepard introduced the salarian geneticist, a large krogan, now present at the table, after having had his own introduction, sat in his own little world, happily indulging in Earth's finest freshwater shrimp. Though he may not have caught them himself, it didn't seem to make them any less appetizing.

"The STGs... Impressive..." The Captain affirmed, as he and Mordin shared a very quick handshake.

"Sounds like you've built one hell of a roster, Commander..." He assured with a brief nod towards Shepard, before turning back to Mordin. "The best of the best."

"Yes." Mordin enthusiastically concurred. "Quite proud of accomplishments while working with Shepard. Not always so, with previous endeavors..." He paused momentarily, as he inhaled deeply. "Lines between right and wrong... Obscure. Always did what had to be done. Not always proud of it..."

"We've all been there, Mordin..." Garrus offered sympathetically, from his seat beside Tali. "Comes with the territory."

Mordin nodded in response, as he retracted himself from the head of the table to find a seat. As he stepped aside, an asari hostess, with a nervous smile on her face, came up to the Captain, accompanied by a familiar geth.

"Uh... Captain Ryback, sir..." She began timidly, pointing back at Legion, over her shoulder. "This... Another of your guests has arrived..."

"Oh, Captain. This is Legion." Shepard proudly introduced, as Legion stepped forward, with a quick series of clicks and chirps, common to geth. "The first, and so far only, geth member of my team. But a very welcome edition."

"And our first geth passenger to boot!" Ryback exclaimed, cheerfully greeting the mechanical combatant. "I've never met a geth before, so it's good to meet you..." He declared, as he extended an ambivalent hand "€" uncertain if the handshake was a custom understood by geth kind.

Legion's illuminated optic lens moved down, and focused on the Captain's extended hand. A few of the small, mechanized panels on his head motored back and forth, as the mobile platform attempted to compute the situation.

"Ryback, Captain. We greet you." Legion said in his metallic, monotonous voice, as he reciprocated the gesture, placing his tri-fingered hand against the Captain's palm.

Ryback grinned, as he closed a grip around the cybernetic hand, and the two shared an awkward, rigid handshake.

"Shepard, Commander." The geth continued, turning to Shepard as the two released their grip. "We fail to qualify your request as logical..."

"Huh...?" A befuddled expression came over Shepard's face, as Ryback sat back down.

"You requested our presence at this congregation..." Legion explained. "This does not qualify as logical..."

"What are you talking about, Legion? What's not logical?"

"Dinner... The principal meal of the day." The rigid geth elaborated. "A formal feast, or banquet where the aforementioned is consumed..."

We are geth. We do not require the same nourishment as organics... Your request of our presence is illogical..."

"Ugh..." Shepard groaned, clutching his eyes shut, as he pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and index finger.

"I told you he was going to say something like that..." Tali chimed in.

"Legion... You don't have to eat..." The Commander assured, in a somewhat annoyed tone. "I invited you because you're a member of my team... Just....! Sit there, or something..."

Legion stood silently for a moment, as the aperture in his optics shifted back and forth. Just then, coming to a decision, he gave an abrupt turn, and walked down towards the other end of the table to find a seat.

"You'll have to excuse Legion..." Shepard humbly turned back towards Ryback, and said with a modest smile, as he shook his head. "He hasn't had much... out of combat interaction. We're still breaking him in."

The Captain didn't respond. There was no need to. Instead his belly shook, as he chuckled silently, and nodded his head, with his eyes closed – obviously taking delight in meeting the colorful array of combatants on this heroic team.

"Heh... Hey, Commander..." Joker interjected, with a chuckle of his own. "Now that the Reapers are dead, maybe we should recycle him into something more useful... Like a big screen HV."

Shepard rolled his eyes a bit at the remark, however unable to stop himself from smiling a bit at the notion. "Laugh it up, Joker..."

"Here we are..." The hostess announced, as she arrived at the table, with a physicist and an operative in tow. "Captain Ryback. More of your guests, sir."

"Ah, I was beginning to think the two of you weren't gonna show..." Shepard stated, standing up from his seat, as his eyes lit up with pride, and a wide grin grew on his face.

"We were... held up..." Miranda explained, with a bit of a smirk.

Gordon stood silently beside her. He took a dignified stance, and a calm demeanor, despite showing obvious signs of discomfort. His eyes seemed to drift a bit, and bat around the room, or towards the floor. And he kept his head tucked down into his shoulders a bit. But for the most part, he did his best not to let his minor social awkwardness get the better of him.

"Captain Ryback, may I introduce my second in Command, Miranda Lawson." Shepard announced, as Ryback stood up to properly greet the beautiful young woman. "Miranda's highly skilled, highly intelligent, and a powerful biotic."

"How do you do, Captain."

"Absolutely charmed, M'lady." Ryback humbly assured, as he reached for Miranda's hand, bowed his head, and gently kissed its back in a gentlemanly fashion.

Miranda gave a shy smile, as she retracted her hand back from his grip. She slowly stepped aside, revealing a nervous Freeman behind her.

"And Captain, it is with great pride, that I would like to introduce you to..."

"Good gracious, son!" The Captain exclaimed, cutting Shepard off, as he suddenly noticed Gordon. "Are you that anxious to get back into battle?" He scoffed, with a snicker, causing Freeman to raise a confused eyebrow. "Why the targeting visor?"

"Oh..." Gordon uttered nervously, suddenly realizing how out of place he probably looked, as he touched the sides of his visor with his fingers.

Despite the various readouts, and displays he had completely forgotten he was wearing a device meant for the battlefield. After wearing them for a week or so now, he had grown as accustomed to them as he had to his normal glasses, or his HEV Suit.

"These are just temporary. I've been using them as a substitute, until I'm able to get my normal glasses repaired."

"Glasses...?" Ryback queried, perplexed. "You mean those things people wore over their eyes, back a hundred years ago...? Didn't you ever get the ocular enhancement, as a child...?"

"Uh, no... I..."

"Captain..." Shepard quickly interjected for Gordon. "Allow me to explain on his behalf. As I was saying, I'd like to introduce you to a man who I grew up idolizing."

Ryback turned towards the Commander as he explained, the puzzled expression still prominent on his face.

"Captain Ryback... this is Dr. Gordon Freeman. THEE... Doctor Gordon Freeman..."

"Gordon Freeman?" Ryback exclaimed in shock, as he pivoted his head back and forth between the Commander, and Gordon. "You mean the war hero...?"

Shepard only responded by nodding adamantly, with his arms crossed and a look of absolute certainty reflected in his eyes.

"Gordon Freeman?" An eavesdropping young woman exclaimed to herself, as she held her earpiece firmly in place with two fingers, listening intently from her place at a nearby table. "He can't be serious..."

She turned around in her seat, looking back towards the Captain's table - watching the three men converse, as she listened.

"The One Free Man, Gordon Freeman?" Ryback beseeched in disbelief. "The one you thanked in your speech? I thought you were just being figurative... Or... I don't know..."

The Captain stopped, and took a long, hard look at Gordon - examining him from top to bottom, with a perspicacious eye, as Gordon simply stood there, with a nervous, humble look on his face.

"Hmm..." The burly Captain uttered pensively, as he stroked his beard. "Well... Lord knows you do look exactly like every single picture of Gordon Freeman I've ever seen..."

"But how can this be him?" Ryback demanded dubiously, as he turned back to Shepard. "History says that Gordon Freeman died in a battle with the Combine, outside of White Forest... And even if he didn't, how could he still be alive?"

"Yeah, it can't be him!" The skeptic McClane declared to herself, as she listened. "No way!"

"Well, I can explain that too..." Shepard assured, as he looked at Gordon. "Although Dr. Freeman here was thought to be dead, he was never really killed. You see, he was taken, and put into biotic stasis, which is why his body was never found. It's a convenient explanation, I know. But it's the truth..."

Gordon watched powerlessly as the Captain and the Commander debated back and forth over his existence, and identity. He rolled his eyes a bit, as he let his shoulders slouch. But, this actually wasn't all that uncommon for him. He thought back a bit to his earlier days at Black Mesa, when his colleagues would argue back and forth, before eventually dumping their mindless, repetitive tasks onto him. He also remembered how Dr. Kleiner and Dr. Magnusson would go at it, while he and Eli simply stood and watched from the sidelines, often betting on the winner.

"I'm sorry, Commander..." Ryback rejected, adamantly shaking his head. "Not to question your word, but this is an awful lot to swallow... I mean, you're saying that this man is the greatest historic figure mankind has ever known... Do you have any proof for such an outrageous claim...?"

Shepard sighed, bowed his head, and shook it. "No, I can't offer you any sort of solid evidence..." He reluctantly admitted. "But I will say this... How else do you think we found an alien race that had been lost among the galaxy for over a hundred years...?"

"He was responsible...?"

"Yep..." The Commander affirmed with a confident nod. "Back in the twenty-first, sometime during the Earth Rebellion, the vortigaunts left some sort of beacon, or mark on Dr. Freeman. It gave them the ability to communicate with him, telepathically."

"What...?" Cameron whispered to herself, in wide eyed shock, as she listened.

"When he was brought out of stasis, they sensed him. And it was through him that they managed to communicate their exact location to us." Shepard explained, as he grinned at Gordon with a firm nod.

"That's how we found Xen..."

Ryback turned to look at Gordon, his mouth agape, and eyes opened wide.

"Captain Ryack..." Shepard continued. "The man before you is the one responsible for saving humanity nearly two centuries ago... And if it weren't for him, we never would've found Xen. We never would've stopped the vorchia incursion on their homeworld... And their weapon would've been lost."

"Hell, we probably would've ended up scouring the galaxy for any forces we could muster â€" trying to unite them in a desperate campaign that might've been destined to fail... None of us might be here today, if not for him..." He declared, in a solemn tone, as Ryback kept his attention on a reserved Gordon. "So yes sir... This IS the One Free Man..."

"God in heaven..." Ryback uttered in a hushed, trembling, voice, as he very slowly, very humbly extended a hand towards Gordon. "For-Forgive me for doubting you, son... Let me tell you that it is... An honor beyond words... to meet the savior of humanity himself..."

Gordon raised his eyebrows, and bit down on his lips a bit at the illustrious greeting he was given, as he extended his own hand.

"An honor to meet you as well, sir..." He affirmed, modestly.

"Hehehehe..." Ryback erupted into a jovial chuckle, as the two shared a firm, hearty handshake. "And it's true what the codices say about you, isn't it? Man of few words, and many talents!" He exclaimed, with a merry laugh, as he patted Gordon on the back. "I will say, I imagined you taller, though..."

3. Chapter 3: The Captain's Table Part II

****Salvation: Episode I â€" The Taking of the Carmenta Illustria**

>Disclaimer: This fan-fiction is part of an episodic series taking place after Salvation: A Half-Life/Mass Effect Universe Fan Fiction, which will lead directly to its sequel, Salvation II: Project Prometheus. These episodes and sequel take place OUTSIDE of the Mass Effect 3 continuity. Characters property of their respective companies, Half-Life created by Valve and Mass Effect created by Bioware.

****Chapter 3: The Captain's Table (Part II)****

****A Hero's Introduction****

"Wait just a minute!" A woman's voice suddenly spurned, as the four stood convened at the head of the table.

The rest of the crew either turned around in their seats, or looked up to see the brash Cameron McClane rushing up to the table, in a huff.

"Oi... Her again..." Tali uttered with disdain.

"Miss, I told you. You can't be here... What do y..."

"I'm sorry, Captain!" She quickly exclaimed, cutting him off. "But I need to get something straight here..."

She rushed up to Gordon, and quickly eyed him from top to bottom with the same percipient eye he had gotten a few moments ago.

"Are you saying that you are THEE Gordon Freeman?" She demanded, as she pointed a finger in his face. "The One Free Man... The Opener of the Way... Anti-Freakin-Citizen One? THAT Gordon Freeman?"

"Miss..." Shepard sternly interjected, crossing his arms, and furrowing his brow in an intimidating fashion. "Just how the hell did you hear us from way over there...?"

The inquiry quickly drew her eyes wide open, as she pursed her lips with an "uh-oh" expression on her face.

"Uhm... Well I... You See..." She turned to Shepard and began muttering nervously, after she realized she blundered. "I... Just overheard, that's all."

"Bull!" Shepard refuted angrily. "I saw where you came from. There's no way you could've heard us..."

"Shepard." Garrus chimed in, as Cameron looked around nervously, hoping to miraculously pull some answer out of the air, to appease the aggravated Commander with.

"Check under the table where she was standing." He instructed, as he motioned with his head.

"No wait!"

The Commander slouched over, and ran his fingers underneath the corner of the table. As he did so, he found a small, circle shaped protrusion, and quickly peeled it off, before bringing it out.

"A bug..." He affirmed, as he examined it â€" rotating the small transmitter around in his fingers.

"Alright, lady..." He angrily began, as he slammed his opened palm hands down on the table hard, likely crushing the small device on impact. "Just who the hell are you, and why the hell are you spying on us?"

"Yes, and I suggest you talk fast..." Miranda demanded, as she took a commanding step forward, and raised a fist, engulfed in a blue, biotic flame.

"Umm..." Cameron groaned nervously, as she stepped back, and put her hands up, at her sides. "Okay, look... I'm a reporter for Westerlund News..."

The instant she said it, Shepard's entire crew slouched down in their chairs, rolled their eyes, and began an unpleasant symphony of annoyed moans and groans. The blue flame around Miranda's fist

quickly faded, as she too rolled her eyes, scoffed under her breath, and turned away.

"I-I was booked on this ship to try and get the inside scoop of how you and your team stopped the Reapers!" She said to Shepard. "I mean this is the story of the century! And you've hardly given any statements at all, since your speech on Earth!"

"B-Bu-But now I find out that you might be Gordon Freeman!" She continued on, in a fast-talking, ecstatic rant, as she turned back to face the Doctor. "The Legendary Free Man himself! Alive and well, here in the twenty-second century! And that you're the reason contact was once again made with the vortigaunts. AND That you're part of the team that stopped the Reapers! Commander Shepard AND Gordon Freeman! This is... This is big! This is huge! This is the biggest story of all time! And it's mine!"

"Someone get this woman a towel..." Jacob said mockingly, causing the entire table to laugh out loud, as he sat reclined in his seat, with the back of his head resting on his clasped hands.

Completely unfazed by their ridicule, she quickly materialized the omni-tool on her hand, and continued on with her hysterical bombardment of inquiries.

"Tell me! H-how did it happen? How did you survive?" She demanded anxiously, as she held her omni-tool up to Gordon's face, like a microphone.

The stunned Dr. Freeman reeled his head back a bit, completely taken by surprise at this woman's incessant interest in him.

"Who put you into stasis? What really happened in that final battle with the Combine? What proof do you have? Please! Give me something!" She begged.

"Uh, hey! Wait a minute!" Gordon pleaded, putting two hands out in front of him to try and quell this assault of question. "Listen, I'm not looking for any sort of undue fame..." He assured sincerely. "I'm just a physicist from Seattle... I didn't ask for any titles or appellations... Yes, I am Gordon Freeman. No, I don't have any proof of it. But I'm not asking you to believe me. So believe what you want... I don't see what the big deal is..."

"Well said." Miranda firmly acknowledged, from her place at his side.

"Now if you would kindly lea..."

"Don't see the big deal?" The exuberant reporter erupted again, cutting Miranda off, and causing her to ball her hands into tight fists, to match the angry sneer on her face.

As the half-crazed woman continued, she never noticed Captain Ryback signaling over one of the nearby Security Officers, standing at his station near one of the exits.

"Don't you know who you are? Or who you're claiming to be? You're the biggest figure in human history! There are folk songs about you!"

"Folk songs...?" Gordon uttered, with a skeptic look.

"Yes!" The fanatic young lady continued, as the Turian Security Officer stoically arrived at her side, with his hands behind his back. "And there are books, and movies, and documentaries! For god's sakes, you were canonized into Sainthood by the Catholic Church early this century!"

"Sainthood?" He beckoned in shock, opening his eyes wide.

"Is this woman being a bother to you, Captain?" The steadfast officer questioned.

"Yes." Captain Ryback acknowledged, as he sat back down in his seat. "Would you kindly eject her from the dining hall for the remainder of the evening. Thank you, sir..."

"Yes, sir!" The officer submitted, with a quick salute.

"Come along, Miss..." He ordered in a calm, yet firm tone, as he placed his hand on her shoulders and pulled back.

"No, no, wait!" She pleaded, as she slowly began to get carted away. "Dr. Freeman, Commander! Please, just one statement! I really need this story! This is my big break!"

"Here, take this with you!" Shepard shouted, tossing the tiny, crushed transmitter at the woman, who caught it in her cupped hands.

"You didn't have to break it, these are expensive, you know!" She yelled back, as she was dragged towards the exit. "And they come out of my salary! Ouch! Easy on the dress, you glorified rent-a-cop, You don't have to..." Her gripes and complaints could still be heard, before being drowned out by the music, and the crowd.

"Someone should definitely tell that woman to switch to decaff..." The Captain said jokingly, causing Shepard's crew to laugh out, mildly "possibly out of nothing more than respect.

"Obviously suffering from over anxiety..." Mordin supplemented, from his seat at the far end of the table, besides Grunt. "Would personally recommend relaxant, or mild sedative... In-depth psychological evaluation may also prove fruitful..."

Gordon stood silently, still at the head of the table - his lips cracked open, and a blank, contemplative stare on his face... The type of pensive gaze one might get, after having just been told they were adopted.

Miranda placed a gentle hand onto his shoulder, suddenly snapping him back to reality. He turned to look at her, and with a warm smile she nudged him over, and motioned for them to retreat to their seats. The dumbfounded look in his eyes faded momentarily, as he smiled back, and they withdrew from the head of the table.

"Well it's definitely been an interesting night, so far..." Ryback stated, shaking his head, with a bit of an exasperated sigh. "But let's see if we can't salvage the rest of the evening, and have

ourselves a good dinner... Are there many more of your crew coming, Commander?"

Uh, no... I think that's everybody." Shepard affirmed, as he leaned forward in his seat, and took a quick glance down the two rows of his squad, lining both sides of the table.

The Captain took his place of importance, at the head of his eponymous table. Commander Shepard sat directly at his right hand side, and Jeff Moreau, on his left. Down the right hand side of the table; Tali sat beside John, Garrus beside her, the corpulent Grunt beside him, with Mordin occupying the last seat, on the far end. Along the left hand side, Jacob filled the chair beside Joker, as Gordon took the empty seat next to him, with Miranda at his side, while their amicable geth team mate already occupied the final seat, across from Mordin, beside her.

"I also had another human biotic, a drell assassin, and an Asari Justicar on my team..." Shepard explained to the Captain. "But Jack, and Thane, the human and the drell, decided to stay back on Earth together..."

"Talk about your all time odd couples, eh Commander?" Joker suggested, with the makings of a scoff in his voice.

"I think it's cute." Tali added. "And I hope they find happiness together... I know they both need it."

Shepard nodded in agreement, before continuing. "...And with the mission over, Samara, our Justicar, went back to her sworn duties..." He said, giving a quick, disappointed shrug of his shoulders. "I tried to convince her to keep her vow of s...ubsumation... or whatever she called it, to me a while longer, so she could enjoy this with us. But she'd hear nothing of it..."

"Ah..." Ryback uttered, raising his eyebrows, and nodding his head in an understanding fashion. "Well that is a pity. I would have loved to have met them all... But!" He said out jovially, as he sat up in his chair, with an eager smile on his face. "While I have all of you here, why don't we go ahead an order. I'm sure we're all starving."

The Captain summoned a small, holographic panel on the left corner of his table; selecting an option to call for service.

As Miranda and most of the others scanned thru their menus, Gordon sat with a reflective countenance - his eyes batted back and forth a bit, starring blankly into space. Quite literally in fact. He starred off into the abyss right outside the towering panoramic window before him, behind the right hand row of combatants.

"Heh, what's the matter, Freeman?" Garrus questioned, with a bit of a concerned chuckle, lowering his menu from his place directly across the table from the physicist. "You look spooked..."

"What's wrong...?" Miranda questioned worriedly, as she too glanced over and noticed the disbelief reflected in his eyes.

"Huh...?" A distracted Gordon replied, as he snapped back again, to see the worried eyes on him. "Oh... No, nothing... I was just... Just

thinking about what that woman said... She wasn't serious, was she...?"

"What? You mean about there being movies, and books and such about you?" Miranda asked.

"No..." Gordon replied, furrowing his brow a bit. "That much I knew there was to an extent... But she said people sang songs about me..." He continued, shaking his doubtingly. "That... That I was canonized into Sainthood...?" He beckoned in shock, garnering the attention of those around him, as he looked back and forth between Garrus, and Miranda.

"That can't be true, can it...?"

"You're asking the wrong person, Freeman. I ain't human..." Garrus cheerfully rebutted, shaking his head, and putting his hands up.

"Well, actually..." Shepard interjected, as he leaned forward in his seat. "You know, there's an old saying that goes 'there's never an atheist in a foxhole...' And I've been in a lot of foxholes... Now although I will admit that I'm not the most spiritual person, I have heard the name Saint Gordon thrown around from time to time... Not sure if it was you, though..."

"No, it's him." Jacob quickly added to the conversation, nodding confidently. "It's true. Saint Gordon... He's the uh..." The operative lightly snapped his fingers, in an attempt to jog his memory. "...The Patron Saint of impossible situations, and overwhelming odds..."

Gordon raised his eyebrows in wide-eyed shock, as Jacob's statement only exacerbated his stunned expression.

"Yeah, there's that'uhm... That famous stained glass window of him, in that Cathedral, in White Forest..." Jacob continued. "Or at least there was... It was probably destroyed in the Reaper attack..."

"I know the Cathedral." The Captain affirmed, as he sat back with one arm crossed, and a finger pointed out in front of him. "St. Gordon's. One of my nieces was married there, recently."

"This is too much..." Gordon said with an exasperated laugh, as he leaned back in his chair, with a flush look on his face.

"You were humanity's White Knight..." Miranda assured in a tender tone, as Gordon looked over at her. "Anyone who ever aspired to be a hero, did so by modeling themselves after you..."

"Listen to her, Gordon..." Shepard added, with a wink, just as a team of two asari waitresses, supplemented by one salarian waiter arrived. "You make one hell of a role model..."

Gordon grinned, and his chest jolted with a suppressed laugh, as he lightly shook his head.

"Are we ready to order?" A cheery voice from one of the waitresses beckoned, as she came to stand behind Gordon and Miranda, while her co-workers tended to the others.

"Oh, uh..." He uttered, as he quickly picked up the menu and skimmed through it for the first time. "Yeah, just a sec... I could use a good meal."

The menu was about the size of a standard datapad, although nearly paper thin. As a person scanned through the menu, they'd find various selections of wines, beverages, deserts, appetizers, and dinner courses from every conceivable origin in the galaxy. Each accompanied by small, interactive notations such as preparation previews, culinary origins, and additional nutritional information.

"I'll have the grilled zehk'reth, with the narja glaze." Garrus affirmed.

"I'll take the braised lamb, with popcorn sweetbreads, and rosemary garden peas." Miranda added.

"Let me have the smoked beef tenderloin, with the housemade bacon and Yukon potatoes."

"I'll have the same thing." Shepard and Jacob both ordered.

"Gimme the grilled Halibut." Joker requested.

Gordon quickly browsed through the menu, as his teammates placed their orders around him. A lot of the Earthly favorites sounded absolutely delicious, but tonight, he was feeling adventurous.

"Hmm..." He hummed to himself. "I think I'll have the Khur... Khurgaresh..." He decided.

"Bold choice, sir!" The asari affirmed, as she took his menu from him.

"Hah!" Grunt's bellowing laugh suddenly rang out, from his place a few seats down. "I knew you had a quad, Freeman! Bring me the same thing." He demanded, as he turned and looked up at the waitress.

"Are you sure you want that...? That's a krogan dish..." Miranda informed in a hushed voice.

"Yeah, why not?" He asked, shrugging his shoulders with a confident nod. "It's about time I start trying new things."

"It's got a bit of a kick to it..." She cautioned, with a dubious expression.

"Eh... I don't really mind spicy foods."

"Uh... Is there... Is there something you would like, Sir...? Ma'am...?" The salarian waiter timidly questioned, as Legion looked up at him, studying his person.

"We are Geth." Legion's oscillating voice retorted. "We are a gestalt consciousness, comprised of precisely one-thousand one-hundred eighty three separate geth programs, contained within a single unique mobile platform. The concept of male and female genders has no significance

to us. And we do not require the same sustenance needed by organics to survive and function."

"Uh... so, nothing for you then...?"

Legion sat silently for a moment. "Negative." He eventually answered. "Our orders are to 'just sit there, or something'. We are building a consensus on 'or something.'"

The salarian waiter forced a polite smile, simply nodding his head, as he slowly turned away.

"Do you offer meals in sterilized elutriation dispensers, for quarians?" Tali inquired, still skimming through her menu.

"Yes ma'am!" The tending asari affirmed, assuredly. "Virtually all our menu items are available for S-E-D preparation. With the rare exception of a few which must be ordered several hours before hand. Each order is triple filtered and prepared in our own state-of-the-art clean room kitchen."

"Oh, good!" Tali exclaimed happily. "Can I get the Rasi Vel Cuam?"

"One S-E-D prepared Rasi Vel Cuam, coming right up!" The waitress acknowledged, as she marked the order down on her datapad.

All around the table, the Commander's intrepid crew continued to place their orders, and hand in their menus â€" making light, jovial conversation amongst themselves as they did so. But one among them, the one donned in a pristine white Captain's uniform, kept a silent mouth, and a contemplative eye, as he studied the bearded physicist chatting with his new found, porcelain skinned love interest.

"Dr. Freeman..." Ryback began, breaking his silence â€" his deep, rugged voice resonating across the table, coercing the crew to stop and turn to him. "Gordon Freeman..." He enunciated, with a pronounced, disbelieving sigh, as he lightly shook his head.

"I'm still finding it hard to believe..." He continued, as the waiters left to fulfill the orders. "So you were actually there, during the Earth Rebellion...? You fought against the Combine...?"

A respectful silence crept in over the table â€" and the light almost seemed to dim on the rest of Shepard's crew, obscuring them into the background, and leaving only the Doctor and the Captain prominent.

"Uh, ahem..." Gordon stuttered a bit, as he cleared his throat. "Y-yes sir... I did..."

"What was it like?"

"E-excuse me...?" Gordon questioned, not sure he understood.

"You know, the Rebellion. The war with the Combine..." Ryback beckoned, with considerable more urgency, as he raised his hands in front of him, and shrugged his shoulders. "What was it like...?"

"Uh..." Gordon struggled to respond. He turned his gaze away, and did his best to search for the right words, as his eyes flickered a bit.

The memories flashed in his mind like a slide show. Coming to him in rapid fire flashbacks, one after another, and at the same time, all at once... The Anti-Mass Spectrometer. The breach at Black Mesa. Waking up in a world ravaged by war. And fighting to save a ruined Earth, and those in it... Only to be taken away from it once more. It all seemed to blend together into one harrowing collage.

"It's strange..." Gordon began calmly, as he looked back up at the Captain. "It's as if... I want to always remember. And at the same time, I'm trying desperately to forget."

Everyone at the table paid the utmost attention, as they were suddenly captivated.

"I don't know, sir..." He continued, bowing his head a bit. "You're asking me to describe it. And... I'm not sure I know how... All I can say is one day, you're living a normal life... And in one brief, TINY moment... In the blink of an eye..."

Gordon stopped, as he reflected. _"Gordon! Get away from there!" "Shutting down! Attempting shut down! It's not... It's not shutting down!" _

"All you can see is death..."

A shiver rattled John Shepard's spine, as he listened. He could feel the cooling sensation of the goosebumps forming under his sleeves. And he knew the feeling Gordon was describing only too well...

"One minute, you see the world as it is... Then all of a sudden, you see a world... A world without color. All you see is ashes, and dust... Charred bodies in the streets... Human beings rotting away in sewers... People being systematically slaughtered. And turned into something... Horrible..."

Gordon cringed his eyes, and shuddered â€" the chill rattling his teeth.

"I saw countless people die, right before my eyes..." He continued, keeping his head bowed. "Good, innocent people who didn't deserve to die..." He slowly looked up and glanced around the table. "People who I was helpless to save..."

"All that stuff about me being a hero..." He said, solemnly shaking his head. "That's not true... I was never trying to be a hero. I was just trying to do what I had to do... What they needed me to do..."

"That's what a hero does, Dr. Freeman." Shepard asserted, with a gleam of admiration in his eye. "It's like I told you â€" extraordinary things at extraordinary times... We didn't ask for this. None of us did... We didn't choose this, and we weren't chosen... We do what we do because we're the only ones that can..."

"Hmph..." Gordon laughed under his breath. "Profound words as always,

Commander." He smiled back, reciprocating a mutual amount of admiration and respect. "You might be right..."

The Doctor and The Commander... They always seemed to share a deep respect for one another - considering the other's deeds and accomplishments far greater than their own. Perhaps it was because they were the same type of person. A higher echelon of hero. Different incarnations of the same force. Separate saviors, to the same ends...

"You're all heroes." Captain Ryback put forth, looking around at the faces at his table. "Every last one of you... And you know what?" He asked, as he pointed towards Gordon. "Whether you are, or you're not the real Gordon Freeman, the fact that you are a member of this man's crew." He said, proudly pointing a hand towards Shepard. "And part of the team that stopped those ungodly machines. Well, it doesn't get any more heroic than that... Learn to give yourself some credit, son."

He gave Gordon a firm nod, just as the team of waiters returned, each carrying a number of large, round trays and bringing with them the heavenly, mouth watering aroma, of only the finest cuisine.

"But enough about that. What say we eat, huh!"

The team of waiters quickly spread out, and immediately went to work like a race car pit crew, laying down small, portable tables to hold the large trays, as they dispersed the meals.

"Your braised lamb, ma'am."

"Here you are, sir. Grilled zehk'reth."

"Your beef tenderloin, Commander."

"Mmm... This smells delicious!"

"Who had the halibut?"

"Right here!"

"Oh, that looks pretty good. I think I should've gotten that."

The voices of the crew blended and intertwined around the table, as their meals arrived in front of them. What an unusual sight. A team of highly skilled, highly trained combatants, sitting down to a fancy meal, on board a luxury cruise liner. There was a time when this would've been the furthest thing on any of their minds... "Will I be alive tomorrow?" Was the main thought that would haunt them. "Will this ever end...?"

But now, as the savory, beguiling aroma from his meal floated up to him from his plate, Commander Shepard looked over his crew. Even though he couldn't help the mournful feeling he got every time he thought about the millions that had been lost on Earth - at that moment, what he felt more than anything else was pride...

"Enjoy it guys..." He thought to himself, as he picked up a knife and fork - finding himself helpless to resist the meticulously prepared dinner before him any longer. "You deserve it."

"Here you are sir, your khurgaresh." The asari waitress announced, as she set a steaming plate down in front of Gordon. However, one might say it was fuming more than it was steaming...

"Oh... Uh..." Gordon uttered, as he examined his meal. "Ahem, well... This looks... Ahem... interesting..." He said, clearing his throat, which was tickled by the overpowering pungence.

The entree was some sort of brown, viscous, globular mound. It looked exotic to say the least, but it wasn't offensive in presentation, and surely palatable... It was lightly drizzled with a reddish glaze, on a bed of tiny morsels that looked almost like white rice, and lightly garnished with tiny leaves of exotic fauna. But that aroma...! It actually caused the Doctor's eyes to water.

"Mmm-Omm..." Grunt growled pleausably, as he chomped down on a sizable portion of his own dinner.

Gordon cut through the khurgaresh with his fork, separating a small piece, which he then scooped up. With a quick exhalation, while thinking "Here goes nothing." He opened wide and brought it in.

"Argh! Ughhh!" He coughed, and gagged, clutching his throat with his hand, after taking his first bite. He immediately snatched up his napkin, and drew it over his mouth â€" coughing wildly into it, as his eyes watered, and his face began to turn red.

"Are you alright...?" Miranda asked worriedly, however with marked traces of a snicker in her voice, as she patted his back.

"Mmmph... Mmmhmmm!" He gave a muffled reply, into his napkin, with a reassuring nod, and red, watery eyes, as his coughing slowly dissipated.

"Argh... Ahem... Uhm... Well..." He began with a throaty voice, and a series of gravelly groans - still trying to get over the burning in his throat, as he lowered his napkin and raised his wine glass for a drink.

"I told you it was strong..." Miranda reprised, shaking her head, with a sympathetic smile.

"Mmm..." Gordon mumbled through his glass, shaking his head a bit, as he drank.

"No, it's not that..." He responded, as he lowered his glass. "It's just...Well, it tastes more... Alkaline than I expected... It's like biting into a battery!"

"Hah! It's good, ain't it?" Grunt heartily asserted, pointing his fork at Freeman, as he chewed. "But it takes a little getting used to."

"Here!" He offered, as he raised a bottle towards Gordon. "Wash it down with a little of this. Ryncol. The best on Tuchanka!"

"Uhh..." Gordon uttered ambivalently, reluctant to take anything else of krogan conception. Suddenly, he felt a poke at his thigh, coaxing

him to turn to the culprit Miranda, who warned against it with a subtle yet distinctive nod.

"N...o, that's okay..." He politely declined.

"Suit yourself." Grunt remarked indifferently, as he shrugged his shoulders, and pulled back the Ryncol. "More for me." He leaned back, raised the bottle, and gulped down a satisfying swig.

Gordon looked back down at his meal with a grimace, and reluctantly prodded at it with his fork, like someone poking a dead animal with a stick to make sure it was dead.

"Sir..." The asari waitress that had just served him leaned over his shoulder, after noticing the obvious dissatisfaction with his chosen selection. "If you'd like, I can bring you something else..."

"Oh, could you?" Gordon practically jumped at the suggestion.

"Absolutely!" She assured. "Might I recommend the brasciloe? It's a tender beef roll, stuffed with veal, prosciutto, parmesan, and provolone cheeses, topped with a delicate white wine sauce, mushrooms, and green peppers... It's one of our most popular human dishes."

"Heh, that'd be just fine..." Gordon conceited with a laugh. "I think I'll stick to human food for a while."

"Very good, sir!" She quickly marked it down on her datapad, and took up his severed meal, before turning and briskly walking away.

Tali quickly unraveled the small, but thick hose, wrapped around the large, metallic container in front of her. A few indicator lights, and holographic displays gleamed on the top; exhibiting readouts such as SED contents, internal temperature, and contaminant levels â€" which at the moment, showed a bright green "0%".

"What is that...?" Garrus questioned curiously, when he turned to notice the strange contraption in front of Tali, before he could bring the piece of grilled zehk'reth at the end of his fork, up to his mouth.

"What, this?" She asked, holding the small hose up, as she turned to him. "You've never seen an S-E-D before?"

"No... I can't say that I have."

"Oh..." Tali continued, somewhat surprised. "Well, like I said, it's an S-E-D. A sterilized elutriation dispenser. It filters, and sterilizes food, and feeds it through this tube, to my helmet's induction port." She explained, as she pointed to her faceplate's flashing mouthpiece. "It's so we can eat without having to take our suits off..."

"And sometimes it's nice to have something that isn't intravenously fed to you..." She remarked, sarcastically.

"Oh, is that what it is?" Garrus responded, with a tinge of indiscernible cynicism in his voice. "An S-E-D... Hmm..." He paused

for a moment to feign interest.

"Just kinda looks like a straw to me..."

Tali turned, and glared at him, just before she could connect her S-E-D's tube, to the now opened induction port on the lower portion of her faceplate.

"No..." She rebutted in an annoyed tone. "I told you, it's an S-E-D..."

"If you say so..." He remarked, snidely yet jokingly - shrugging his shoulders, as he nonchalantly went back to his meal.

"You know, I have a shotg... Oh..." Tali began, before stopping herself mid-sentence. "Wait... I guess I don't... Well, either way, I CAN hurt you..." She assured, as she waved a finger at Garrus, before finally connecting the tube to her mask.

The small device hummed softly, as it began a sophisticated internal process, of sterilizing the meal, filtering it, and finally dispensing it, ready to enjoy.

"Hey, Shepard, don't just sit there..." Garrus entreated, as he leaned forward, looking towards the Commander, who was conversing with the Captain. "She's threatening to shoot me again, you know..."

"I'm sure you have it coming, Garrus..." The Commander stated, paying little mind to the pretense panicked turian.

"Yeah, but that's beside the point!"

"Hehe..." The Captain chuckled at the merriment of those at his table, as he held the prime cut of meat on his plate down with his fork, and cut through it with his knife. "So tell me, Commander. What are the vortigaunts like? Are they as peaceful as history says?"

"Oh, definitely." Shepard replied, without qualm. "Very peaceful... And very intelligent."

"Yeah, and they're also tough as nails..." Jacob added to the conversation. "They can be amazing fighters when they have to be."

Shepard nodded in response, as he swallowed down a bite.

"Would you believe they're also incredible chefs?" He asked as he sliced away at another piece.

"Oh?"

"Yeah, when we first arrived on Xen, they invited us to a feast... They served us headcrabs... Barnacles... Antlions... And god knows what else..."

The Captain sneered his face at what was surely a disgusting buffet, as the Commander told his tale.

"I know it sounds weird..." Shepard continued. "I was skeptical at

first too, but I didn't want to insult them... So when I tried their food, I was amazed... I mean it was... fantastic!"

"Really?" Captain Ryback opened his eyes wide, in disbelief, at the surprising revelation.

"Yeah, it sure was..." Jacob augmented on Shepard's behalf. "You know, we definitely gotta go back sometime, Commander... Good eats..."

Shepard chuckled with a mouthful.

"And wh-what about that... weapon of theirs..." Ryback inquired, changing the subject. "That Arch... or Arc... or whatever they're calling it on the news. The thing you used to kill all the Reapers. What is that, exactly? How does it work?"

"Uh..." Shepard uttered at a loss, as he struggled to respond. "Well I'm afraid I can't tell you much. All I know is that it's a weapon... As far as how it works..." He turned, and looked down the table. "You'd have to either ask Mordin or Dr. Freeman..."

"Dr. Freeman!" He called out, just as the waitress returned with his meal. Gordon being the closer of the two scientists.

"Thank you..." He quickly conveyed to the waitress, in a soft spoken tone, as she laid a steaming hot plate down in front of him, before he turned his attention up to the Commander.

"...Yeah?"

"Captain Ryback wants to know how the vort's weapon works..." Shepard informed, pointing his thumb towards Ryback.

"Oh! Well, it's a... It's a resonance weapon." Gordon began to explain, suddenly finding himself in a situation more his element. "Basically, a Quantum Disruptor. You see, every object in matter has a set harmonic resonance. And when two objects are tuned to the same resonant frequencies, entangled if you will, changing the quantum state of one of the objects, will always have the reverse effect on it's entangled counter-part, regardless of the distance between the objects."

"When we activated the vortigaunt's machine, the quantum fluctuation effectively disrupted all the Reapers' energy signatures, causing a complete sub-molecular collapse..."

Gordon observed Captain Ryback's perplexed expression, as he listened, struggling to understand, however most likely failing.

"Hmm..." The lecturing physicist uttered to himself, as he took a brief look around. "Oh, take this, for example!" He urged enthusiastically, as he spotted his nearly empty wine glass, and held it up.

"Now I'm sure you've heard how some opera singers can shatter glass with their voices..." He explained. "This works on a similar principle. The resonance of the glass is matched, and exceeded by that of the resonator... The singer's voice..."

Ding! The glass' melodious chime reverberated across the table, as he lightly tapped the tip of his knife against it.

"When the frequency of the resonator matches the natural resonance of the glass, it will begin to vibrate... However, when the frequencies begin to exceed the resonance of the glass, it'll vibrate more and more, until the sub-molecular structure will begin to break apart, thus resulting in the glass shattering..."

"Of course, the vortigaunt's machine is much more complex than that makes it sound..." He continued, as he lowered the glass. "It works off of quantum wavelength fluctuations instead of sound frequencies, but the end result is pretty much the same..." He grinned, and shrugged his shoulders. "Shattered Reapers..."

"Ah, interesting!" Captain Ryback eagerly admitted. "What a fascinating little presentation, Mr. Freeman, er... Doctor Freeman..."

Gordon smiled, and bowed his head in thanks.

"Wasn't as easy as flipping on a light switch, I take..." The Captain queried, as he looked back at the Commander. "I heard all of you ran into quite a bit of trouble there... And your scars all the say the same thing..."

An exasperated expression washed over Shepard's face, as he nodded slowly. "Well, Captain... Therein lies the real story..."

As the evening drifted on towards the twilight hours, the heavenly bodies of the cosmos painted a celestial nocturne outside the towering windows. A sensation of victory brewed across the table, as the proud crew of the SR-2 Normandy began to depict their triumphant tales. Back and forth they went, telling of Reapers and Vorchas... Eezo Cores, and control rooms, as they partook in a dinner fit for conquering heroes...

"It truly was our greatest of battles!" Grunt bellowed, as he spun his rendition of their battle. "I killed many vorchas, but their numbers were unyielding. By the dozens they came! By the hundreds! But one by one, I plowed through them like a true krogan, worthy of the warlord blood that courses through me! In the end it was them that ran like the vermin they are, while we stood against the rising of the tide!"

* * *

><p>"So there we were..." Jacob said, dashing his hands out in front of him, as he attempted to paint a picture with his gestures. "Weaving our way around the back of the vortigaunt village. We were outnumbered, but we were advancing. That's when that big ugly mother just showed up, outta nowhere... So naturally I know this is gonna be a problem..."<p>

* * *

><p>"Knew Reaper's intentions were obviously hostile..." Mordin explained. "However mission came first... Had to advance..." He stopped, and took a deep breath. "Despite it's presence, Reaper

showed no marked signs of belligerence at first... Hostility came later... Granted the opportunity to test new neural shock mine... Quite effective."<p>

* * *

><p>"As the old machine prepared to discharge its primary weapon, we acknowledged an expeditious retreat was necessary..." Legion's reverberant voice declared, as he focused his optics down the other end of the table. "But we miscalculated the surface density of the soil around the excavated tunnel created by the Hymenoptera... The weight of this unit's metallic composition, proved too great of a burden for the loosened terrain."<p>

* * *

><p>"We were getting cooked alive..." Garrus confessed in a dismal tone, as he recalled the horrific moment. "Legion was stuck, and Thane and Jack were fading fast... I eventually managed to pull the big tin can out, but we were still trapped... I don't know how Jack and Thane held on as long as they did, but if wasn't for them... Neither of us would be here..." He affirmed, with certainty, giving a quick glance towards Legion, before turning back. "Eventually, the damn thing just stopped. Maybe it thought we were dead, or it just got tired... Either way, as soon as it let up, we made a break for the canyon..."<p>

* * *

><p>"As we finished off the last of the vorcha in the Eezo core, Shepard decided he wanted to question one of 'em..." Miranda explained, as she smirked at the Commander. "After a brief, but pointless interrogation, the Reaper took control of its body, and forced us out of the room... When we tried to rush back inside, the door slammed shut on us." She said, shaking her head, as she took a brief, somewhat apologetic glance towards Freeman. "Only Gordon and Shepard made it in. Tali and I were locked out..."<p>

* * *

><p>"It's damn tragic when you think about it..." The Commander began in a somber tone. "So many vortigaunts lost... And changed into those... THINGS... Hundreds of 'em. Probably about half of the village's population... And I mean they just came at us, non-stop... We bottle necked 'em as best we could, but it was just two of us against hundreds of them..."<p>

"Hell, that's all you two seem to need!" Garrus affirmed, with a confident laugh.

"I hear that!" Jacob added in a groaning voice, as he leaned back in his seat and patted his full belly, with a licked clean plate in front of him. "The Collectors, the Combine, the Reapers... I'm not sure there's anything that can kill you two... At least not keep you dead, anyway..."

* * *

><p>"While John, and Dr. Freeman were inside playing..." Tali began, with a playful sarcasm. "I was busy trying to get us back inside. But

I had never worked with vortigaunt technology before. I wasn't sure I could open it. That is until I remembered a sophisticated shunt program I picked up on Omega, that could supposedly hack through any lock."<p>

"Not that it matters to me, but is that legal...?" The Captain asked, dubiously.

"Uh, hehe..." Tali stumbled, and laughed nervously. "Well... Not as legal as it should be... Not in any of the charted systems, anyway... Luckily, the vort's homeworld fell far outside of any legal limitations..."

* * *

><p>"No matter what I did, that damn thing hung on like a pit bull!" Joker exclaimed, anxiously. "I was zoomin'! I was divin'! I even took it straight in to an asteroid field to see if I could shake 'em. But that S-O-B just plowed through everything, without so much as a scratch..." Joker slouched down with a defeated look. If he could, he would've shaken his head.<p>

"I decided to try a maneuver I heard about in flight school..." He continued, somewhat despondently. "As it chased us, I had EDI cut the starboard engines, which swung us around. At precisely the right moment, I had her re-engage all engines in full reverse. The idea was to be able to get a shot off, and then gun it straight forward..."

He sneered and crossed his arms, in a pouty display. "Woulda worked too, but the damn thing clipped our wings before I could get enough distance..."

* * *

><p>"When the Reaper came back, it touched down on the other side of the village, opposite of the control room door..." Shepard imparted, with a worn out sigh. "We hadn't heard anything from Dr. Freeman, and there was no sign that he had managed to get the machine to work. But we couldn't lose that control room... I remember that thing starring me down, as I walked out... Those bright yellow eyes just looming over me..."<p>

"But if nothing else, I wasn't going down without a fight..." He continued, showing a familiar hardened resolve. "I brought out a... bit of an experimental weapon that I've... REALLY come to love." He said, snickering under his breath. "The M-920 Cain â€" Launches a high capacity, twenty-five gram slug, with a fatality radius of up to two-hundred and fifty meters... Hand held Armageddon... The Reaper started charging its weapon, and I started charging mine... Luckily, I was quicker on the draw. Before it was able to fire, I managed to get my shot off.. I nailed that damn thing square on its back, and it fell over like a house of cards! I didn't kill it, but I sure as hell managed to stun it."

He was silent for a moment, clenching his lips, as his eyes seemed to sink a bit. "Wasn't long before it was back up, though..."

* * *

><p>"I had already accepted my fate... Or I was trying to at least..." Gordon explained with sort of a quiet, reserved dignity. "You know, it's frightening and exhilarating when you THINK you might die... But it's terrifying when you KNOW you're going to..." As he spoke, suddenly he felt someone clutch his hand tucked away under the table, on his lap. He knew immediately who it had to be, as he turned, and smiled at Miranda, who squeezed his hand, causing him to squeeze back.<p>

"As I made my peace..." He continued, as he turned back around towards the Captain. "One of the dead husks reanimated... Only much... bigger and stronger than the ones that had previously attacked us..."

"Yeah, we've seen that before..." Shepard replied, as he looked over at Tali and Garrus. "It's the same thing Sovereign did to Saren, when he tried to open the Citadel relay the first time."

"Well, whatever it was, it gave me the worst beating of my life... And I've had quite a few..." Gordon explained, sounding exhausted just from talking about it. "I was completely out of ammo... All I had left were my grenades, and my crowbar. And I couldn't just lob grenades at it, the explosion could've caused a cave in." He released a long, drawn-out sigh, as he shook his head. "So it beat me within an inch of my life, and put a hole in my arm..."

"We had no idea..." The Commander assured, empathetically. "After you fell out of radio contact, and there was no sign that the machine was working, we had to assume that it failed... But, by that point, the Reaper was cooking us alive inside the control room. Bringing it down on top of us. That's when everything just lit up all of a sudden."

"Yeah, well you see what happened was, after it impaled my arm with my crowbar, I had all but given up..." Gordon elaborated. "I couldn't do anything to hurt it, and it just seemed to be toying with me. But as it was coming to finish me off, I spotted something a few feet away."

"The Commander's helmet." He said, still looking at the Captain, as he motioned with his head towards Shepard.

"His helmet?" Ryback questioned, confused and intrigued.

"You see, I figured the helmet was probably composed of the same high density alloys as my armor." He began to explain. "If I could reach it, I could use it with one of my grenades to focus the blast enough, not to cause a collapse. And hopefully not kill me in the process..."

"So as I set one of my grenades, I crawled and dragged my way towards it on all fours. And no sooner had I reached it, than that... monstrosity pulled back at my leg, and hoisted me up by the throat... Obviously it didn't see the helmet as a threat, or it would've tried to stop me... So as it rambled on about something or other, preparing to snap my neck in two, I just slammed the helmet onto its head, shut my eyes, and hoped for the best..." He said, chuckling under his breath, as he thought about it.

"My god..." Captain Ryback uttered in an amazed voice, as a flurry of

chills ran down his spine. "That is truly the most... incredible, inspiring story I've ever heard! You're all lucky to be alive... WE'RE all lucky to be alive, thanks to you..."

"But..." He leaned back, and turned towards the Commander, as a professionally dressed asari woman, holding a datapad, approached from behind him, and waited politely. "Now that the Reapers are all dead, where do you all go from here?"

"Well, after the battle on Xen, I was officially reinstated into the Alliance, back on Earth..." Shepard affirmed, leaning forward on the table, and resting his chin on his clasped hands. "And I'm still a Spectre, so I've still got a job to do... As for the rest of these misfits..." He remarked sarcastically, as he turned to look down the table, smirking at his crew. "Wherever they go from here, is completely up to them..."

"I told you once Shepard." Garrus replied, with a strict affirmation. "Where you go, I follow..."

"Same here..." Added Jacob, with a stoic salute. "I'll follow you into battle any day, Commander..."

"It's an honor to fight at your side, John..." Gordon supplemented, with a proud resolve, and a respectful nod. "My place is here..."

"And besides..." Miranda put forth, with a tinge of sarcasm, as she layered her hands on Gordon's shoulder, and rested her chin on it, while looking at Shepard. "Where else are we going to go?"

"Sorry Commander..." Joker interjected, scooping the last of the chocolate mousse out of his dessert glass, with his finger. "But I think you're stuck with us..."

A grateful smile overtook Shepard's expression, as a feeling of pride washed over him. "Well, thank you guys... I appreciate it. I couldn't ask for a finer crew..."

"Uh, Captain..." The asari that had been waiting patiently behind Ryback finally leaned forward and whispered. "It's about that time, sir... Would you like to do it now?"

"Oh, yes, yes. Of course." The Captain eagerly acknowledged, as he sat up in his seat. "Folks, this is Dharis Shianni, my cruise director." He introduced, as she stood back upright, giving the team a polite, warm smile. "She's going to make a little announcement."

"Miss Shianni." Ryback said, as he turned to look up at her. "Please be sure to give them a proper hero's introduction."

"Of course, Captain." She assured with a nod, as she turned and walked out towards the center of the massive dining hall.

The sound of a loud, high pitched buzz briefly echoed throughout the room, as Dharis tapped on a microphone she held clasped in her hand, no larger than a small pen.

"Ladies and gentlemen, could I have your attention for just a moment,

please?" Her voice resounded loudly throughout the cavernous room, coaxing the dinning patrons to lay down their forks, and wine glasses, as she garnered their full attention.

"Now we're all aware of the tragic attacks that took place just over a week ago, on Earth, the Alliance's Arcturus Station, and the Citadel... Millions of lives were lost to the fleet of monstrous machines we've come to know as Reapers... And while we at Lycuna Star Cruises want all of you to enjoy health, good fortune, and prosperity... We ask that you remember those that were lost..."

A hush fell over the crowd, as they shared in a lamented moment of silence.

"...That being said..." She eventually continued, breaking the silence. "I would like to turn your attention towards the Captain's table, where our own Captain Ryback is dinning with some very special guests."

Just then, the lights around the dinning hall seemed to dim, save for the ones over their table, which actually seemed to intensify.

"From all of us here on-board the Carmenta Illustria, it is my sincerest honor to present to you, the brave men and women who fought to save the galaxy from the Reapers! The renowned crew of the SR-2 Normandy, ladies and gentlemen â€" give them a hand!"

The crew looked around at each other with nervous grins, and dumbfounded expressions as the dinning hall suddenly erupted into a rabble of cheers, applause, and whistles, while a proud, triumphant fanfare began to play from the band, in their honor.

"Dr. Mordin Solus!" She announced excitedly, as the applause continued. "Stand up, please! Stand up, Dr. Solus! Take a bow!" She urged, as she looked over towards the table, motioning for him to get up.

Mordin shrugged his shoulders, and without a second thought, he stood to a hearty ovation, and gave a quick wave before sitting back down.

"Jacob Taylor!"

Jacob raised his eyebrows a bit, as he wiped his hands with his napkin and stood up. He turned around to face the crowd, presenting them with a brief wave, and a salute before sitting back down.

"Yord-not Grunt!"

Grunt huffed a bit at the mispronunciation of his clan name, as he looked around with his arms crossed, and a sour expression on his face. But it wasn't long before he put his hands on the table, and stood up â€" giving only a subtle nod before sitting back down.

The applause seemed to dwindle momentarily between each name, before being fueled into a lively chorus once more, with every announcement.

"Jeffrey Moreau!"

"Welp... My public wants me..." He said, as he struggled a bit to get up. As he turned around, he brought two fingers to his forehead, to salute, before pointing them outward, triumphantly.

"Miranda Lawson!"

Miranda shrugged as she looked at Gordon and stood up. She turned around, and quickly waved to the sound of male hoots and covetous whistles before sitting back down.

"...Legion...!" Dharia hesitated only for a moment, as she called his name.

Legion looked around at his fellow crew mates "components" in his head motoring back and forth as he attempted to comprehend what was happening.

"Get up, Legion." "Stand up." "Go on, stand up." The simultaneous urgings of his team mates coaxed him up, under addled protest

"Our first geth passenger, ladies and gentlemen!" She announced, as he stood, and looked around. "Give him a hand!"

The applause too was somewhat hesitant, but reverent nonetheless.

"You can sit down now, Legion..." Miranda informed the mechanized combatant, as she pulled down on his arm.

"Dr. Gordon Freeman!"

Gordon cringed his eyes tightly as his name was called, after secretly hoping he would be omitted. Finding himself with no other choice, he pushed back on his chair, and stood up.

The ovation continued, as Dr. Freeman subtly raised his hand, bowed his head, and quickly sat back down. However, the Doctor's name and appearance did cause some humans to raise a peculiar eyebrow.

"Garrus Vakarian!"

Without so much as a flinch, a very stoic Garrus stood up from his seat. He lightly tapped on his chest twice with a closed fist, before raising both hands outward, and pointing towards the crowd, which seemed to incite a slightly more fevered response from the female passengers.

"Show off..." Tali said jokingly, as he sat back down.

"Tali'Zorah!"

"Hey, you know what they say... If you got it..." Garrus replied, as Tali stood up and waved to another ovation of hoots, howls, and hollers, from the men, before quickly sitting back down.

"And last but not least, ladies and gentlemen..." Dharia continued, as the band suddenly shifted to a suspenseful drum roll.

"It is my great privilege to present to you a man who needs no introduction... Two years ago, he made galaxy-wide history as the first human ever to be inducted into the Special Tactics and Reconnaissance Branch of the Citadel."

Shepard rolled his eyes, as he smirked, and slouched down in his chair a bit.

"That same year, he became known as the man who saved the Citadel from certain destruction... Ladies and gentlemen... I present to you... The First Human Spectre... The Savior of the Citadel... Lieutenant Commander Johnathan Shepard!"

A champion's symphony began to play, as the crowd erupted into an uproar. Many of the patrons rose to their feet, as a sign of their great respect for the man "applauding, and cheering his name, as he stood and presented a stoic, dignified salute.

"Commander Shepard, sir..." Before he could sit back down, the announcing asari called out, and approached their table, forcing him to remain on his feet. "Would you care to say a few words, and lead us in this evening's toast?"

"Uh..." He hesitated, finding himself put on the spot again, the same way he was back on Earth, as Dharia slowly walked over, and extended the mic towards him. Reluctantly, he took it "realizing now that pretty much wherever they would go, this would be more or less the attention they would be met with.

"Actually, there is something I'd like to say..." His commanding voice echoed loudly throughout the amphitheater-like room, as he began from his place at the table. "After the attacks... Before we booked passage on this cruise, a woman came up to me, back on Earth... She had come to me, with tears in her eyes, to tell me that her husband was killed in the attack..."

As he spoke, a respectful silence befell the room. Every man, woman, and child of every race and walk of life stopped, and paid the utmost regard, and attention to the Commander as he spoke.

"Unfortunately, I didn't know the man well, but I had run into him from time to time... The reason she had come to tell me that he died, was apparently because he idolized me. And she felt he would've wanted me to know that he had died a hero, giving his own life, to save the lives of others..."

"Now me and my crew have been called a lot of things..." He continued, as he pointed down the table, towards his team. "Champions... Heroes... Savors... And I'll go on record right now by saying it's true about each and every last one of them... One of whom I've actually idolized myself, my whole life..."

"But we can't forget that this galaxy is full of heroes... Those that fought and died "standing valiantly in defense of the Citadel... In defense of Arcturus... In defense of the Earth... Even hundreds of our vortigaunt allies, who died standing valiantly in defense of their homeworld..."

"So if I'm going to lead us in a toast, I guess that it must be

this..." He announced, as he lifted his half-filled wine glass off the table, ushering the entire room, including his crew, to do the same.

"Here is to the fall of the Reapers... And to honoring the memory of those that we've lost..."

"Here here!"

4. Chapter 4: Dressed for Duress

****Salvation: Episode I "The Taking of the Carmenta Illustria****

Disclaimer: This fan-fiction is part of an episodic series taking place after Salvation: A Half-Life/Mass Effect Universe Fan Fiction, which will lead directly to its sequel, Salvation II: Project Prometheus. These episodes and sequel take place OUTSIDE of the Mass Effect 3 continuity. Characters property of their respective companies, Half-Life created by Valve and Mass Effect created by Bioware.

****Chapter 4: Dressed for Duress****

"Irrashaimase, friends!" A figure on the big screen H.V. spouted enthusiastically, from within his restaurant's kitchen. "Now, I know what you're all thinking! A whole galaxy full of recipes, and all of them bland and tasteless! Well, look no further than Leo's Citadel Cafe...! Ever had Ramen? It's one of Earth's finest delicacies..."

Click. A sharp crackle of static abruptly interrupted the overzealous restaurateur, as the Commander switched the channel. Shepard sat on the edge of his luxury suite-room bed, with his omni-tool primed, and pointed at the large screen HV, ready to flip the station, if whatever came up wasn't to his liking.

He was donned in a very uncharacteristic set of clothing. His upper body was enveloped in a pristine, layered, white formal shirt, lined with a thin black stripe running down the center. The shirt was tightly fastened, up to his neck, with four, glistening, onyx black buttons, along the front of the shirt's thick, folded collar. He wore a pair of elegant, black, dress pants, with a silky black stripe running down the side of each leg, to his polished, gleaming, black dress shoes. And although his face still bore the traces of the lacerations from that fateful battle; the scars, wounds, and stitches "his face was smoothly shaven, and he emanated with the strong scent of after shave and cologne.

"It's my identity..." "My personality..." "My lifestyle..." "My trademark..." "My image..." A collage of faces, from an array of species, in a plethora of expressions, flashed on the screen - each holding up a different colored hologram encased forearm. "It's not just an omni-tool..." "It's my iTool!" "The all new iTool 5M from Coronix Electronics. Available in five designer colors. Life is a spectrum " Feast your eyes..."

Click.

"Tonight! Snark Week continues on the Exploratory Channel. Could these little monsters be nesting in your h..."

Click.

"The Galaxy thought Blasto was dead..." A feminine voice narrated, as cinematic clips played on the screen. "And so... We gather here, on this most tragic day... To honor, and mourn the loss of a truly noble hero..." "Damn it, Chief! Blasto may have been a hot shot loose cannon, who took no prisoners, used excessive force, and played by his own rules! But he was the best damn Spectre I'd ever seen...!"

Shepard rolled his eyes, and shook his head, as raised his arm, and pointed his omni-tool at the screen.

"Is that the preview for the new Blasto movie?" Tali's voice suddenly echoed out of the open bathroom doorway, impeding his ability to change the channel.

"Ugh, yes..." Shepard replied with a groan, as he lowered his arm, and rolled his head back.

"I wanna go see it, when it comes out!"

"Of course you do..." He replied sarcastically, as he stood up from the bed, and dematerialized his omni-tool, leaving the commercial to play out.

"And I don't want you falling asleep in the theater again, like you did with the first one!"

Shepard smirked, and shook his head, as he walked over to the closet door, where a finely stitched, exquisitely manufactured, black tuxedo jacket hung off the front.

"...They were wrong..." "Gentlemen... With that damned jellyfish out of the picture, there's no one left who can stop us. This galaxy is ours for the taking! Muahahaha!" A door flies open. "Blasto!" "Dead or alive, the criminal scum is coming with this one..." "It can't be! You're dead... We killed you...! We killed y... AHHH!" The screen flashed, and a violent chorus of automatic gunfire, and agonizing screams suddenly echoed throughout the room.

Shepard shook his head, and rolled his eyes, with a disparaging scowl on his face, as he fastened, and adjusted his jacket. A white stripe ran up the side of each sleeve, and the silky lapel on the front of the jacket, formed a small V-shape over his shirt, exhibiting the four, gleaming, black buttons on his collar.

As the Commander finished fastening the last button on his coat, the transformation was suddenly complete. He stood there prominently, torquing his neck from side to side, trying to get a feel for this unusual change of wardrobe, and yet possessing the full semblance of some wealthy industrialist. It is amazing what a simple change of clothes can do for a person — an instant metamorphosis from seasoned soldier, to suave debonair.

"Coming next quarter, from Illium Entertainment..." "Are you speaking to this one...? Are you speaking to this one? Well, you must be

speaking to this one, for there is no other..." "Blasto, please! You can't kill me! I have a wife! Children! Your Enkindlers forbid it...!" "...Enkindle this..." Pow! "Blasto 2: The Jelly Stings Back... Coming soon to a Holomax near you."

"Hey, if we're going to the Nirasha Lounge tonight, we've gotta be out by 8:20, or so!" John called out to Tali, as he walked over to the grand, finely constructed, gilded dresser in the room.

"Why so early?" Tali replied, with a tinge of disappointment in her voice, as Shepard opened the top drawer, and started sifting through it.

"Because..." He announced in response, as he pulled out a small box, which was wrapped and concealed with some of his garments. It was a tiny black box, a little larger than the size of a golf ball, covered with a soft, velvety finish, and lined with golden trim. He smiled nervously, taking a deep breath, as he held it felicitously between his thumb and index finger. "...I've got something special planned tonight."

"Oh, is that tonight?" She beckoned eagerly, as he quickly jammed the box into his left pant pocket. "I can't wait to find out what it is!"

"Welcome back." An asari anchorwoman, sitting at a news desk, marked with the label 'Galactic Media Net News' announced on the HV, as the station's commercial break ended. "If you're just joining us, our top story of course remains the recent invasion of the Reapers â€" the ramifications of which have been felt far and wide..."

The Commander turned his focus to the holovision screen, as the report came on, and coerced him to make his way back to his seat, on the edge of the bed, with his attention enthralled.

"The losses, in what historians have already begun calling 'The Battle of the Black Tide', have now been estimated to be in the tens of millions-" Shepard cringed his eyes, and bowed, and shook his head remorsefully, as he heard the appalling statistic. "-with human military casualties being the heaviest suffered... To anyone wanting to lend their support to the families, and loved ones of those lost, donations can be made to the Red Shield of the Alliance. For more information, visit the Earth Relief Fund on the Extranet. Keyword: Aid."

"...Among those lost, were the four esteemed members of the Galactic Council, whose bodies were recovered three days ago, when the re-situating of the Citadel began. An interim Council has been implemented by the Asari Republics and the Salarian Union until a new Council can be properly elected in the coming weeks. A funeral service for the late Councilors has been scheduled for tomorrow evening, on board the Citadel, with eulogies presented by Admiral Lidanya, Lieutenant Colonel Kirrahe, General Sha'tre, and Admiral Hackett. And will be broadcast galaxy-wide. Check local listings for air times..."

The Commander hung his head low, as he breathed a despondent sigh, and a wrenching knot involuntarily grew in his throat, despite his attempts to swallow it back down. "So long, Captain. Rest in Peace, sir..."

"In other news; the clearing of the dead Reapers, still adrift in Earth's orbit, has hit a major snag recently, due to some strange behavior coming over the clean-up crews."

Shepard suddenly looked back up at the anchorwoman on the screen - a look of worry reflected in his eyes, as a slight chill rattled his teeth.

"For more on this, we go to our Alliance Correspondent, Brendan Teixeira, on board the SSV Orizaba..."

"...It has been nine days since the Earth came under attack from this fleet of monstrous machines, and some twelve-thousand lifeless leviathans still litter the planet's orbit." A male's voice announced, as scenes of the work crews, and tow freighters dragging the Reapers to their fiery graves, cascaded across the screen. "Brian Sowder, an Alliance Serviceman for over twenty-three years, explains just what it was he experienced..."

"I-I felt as if there was this... this scratching in my head!" A man in an Alliance uniform exclaimed anxiously, as he was interviewed. "And it felt like the rooms weren't shaped right... Like the walls were closing in around me. I couldn't breathe..."

"Since the disposal of the Reapers began, similar reports have been coming in of varying degrees..." A young man reported on the screen, from what looked to be the bridge of a dreadnought. "Most cases have been minor, with crew members complaining of headaches, or unusual ringing in the ears. But there have also been reports of workers suffering from hallucinations, or hearing disturbing voices in their heads... There have even been cases of unprovoked bouts of violence among the crews."

"So far the worst incident we've had, came yesterday..." The visage of a tall, professional, uniformed woman stated, as she appeared on the screen, with the words 'Erin Donaghy â€" Captain of the Orizaba' displayed across the bottom.

"While the team of the Saint Olga worked in securing a Reaper to the freighter, one of the men went into a violent frenzy, and attacked one of his co-workers, without any sort of provocation. The attacker then tried to sever the victim's oxygen supply, but was luckily subdued by the others on the team before any real harm could be done... There was apparently nothing to indicate any prior altercations between the two men. As a matter of fact, they were known to be good friends..."

"Christ..." Shepard uttered to himself, as a harrowing chill washed over his body. "God damn those things! Even dead, they're dangerous."

"_Even a dead god can dream..." _The thought echoed in his mind, as he recalled the words from the Cerberus video logs, on-board a derelict Reaper.

"What we've discovered is, the symptoms seem to worsen the longer the crews are in contact with the Reapers." Captain Donaghy continued. "So to alleviate prolonged exposure, we've begun cycling shifts at much shorter intervals. We've also received a lot of aid, on this

front, from the krogans, under the leadership of Warchief Urdnot Wrex " who's been highly instrumental in the clean-up efforts... We're hoping to be rid of these things as quickly as possible."

"Heh, good ol' Wrex..." He declared with a laugh, as the screen cut back to the image of the young, male reporter. "I hope they'll be rid of those damn things soon, too..."

"Reporting to you from the bridge of the SSV Orizaba, high above Earth's Atmosphere, this is Brendan Teixeira, GMN News. Back to you, Tei'ana..."

"...Thank you, Brendan." The Asari Anchorwoman bestowed, as the screen cut back to her. "There is no question that this horrible tragedy has impacted every person of every race, throughout the galaxy, to some extent or another. But thankfully, it does not come without a silver lining."

"Tensions are still high between the quarians and the geth, after nearly three hundred years of animosity. But this past week's monumental treaty signing marks the first true strides towards peace between machines and organics. The Treaty of the Veil allows the quarians to begin efforts to recolonize their homeworld, Rannoch. The geth have agreed to lift their blockade within the Perseus Veil, on the conditions that they be granted a free existence, and the rights given to all sentient organics within Citadel Space. This issue has been met with heavy controversy, and protest " however, due to the geth's instrumental role in the Battle of the Black Tide, officials from the Systems Alliance, the Salarian Union, the Asari Republics and the Turian Hierarchy have all reluctantly agreed to honor the treaty's conditions. This is, however, expected to be done under strict supervision from the Citadel Fleet..."

"...The Alliance is in talks with members of the newly rediscovered vortigaunt race today, discussing plans for a joint effort to create several more of the vortigaunt designed super weapons. It is unknown, whether or not, more Reapers still reside within Dark Space. And since the vortigaunt's weapon, simply referred to, by them, as their 'contrivance', and thus dubbed the 'Anti-Reaper Contrivance', or ARC, was the only thing proven to be effective against the Reapers " the Alliance wants to be sure to have several more implements in place, as a contingency, should another attack occur... Although the Alliance has assisted the vortigaunts in making repairs to the original weapon, on the their homeworld, Xen - it is unknown when production of any additional ARCs will commence. However, it is not expected for several months, as the relief, and clean-up efforts on Earth remain the Alliance's top priority... But due to their tremendous contribution in the war against the Reapers, the vortigaunts are expected to be granted an honorary embassy on-board the Citadel, as soon as a new Council has been elected..."

"So... How do I look?"

Tali's enticing, demure voice finally coerced Shepard's attention away from the screen. Immediately, his jaw dropped, and his suddenly entranced eyes gleamed with a spark not seen before.

There she stood, wrapped down to her feet in a beautiful, flowing, violet satin evening dress, worn over her environmental suit. She actually seemed to sparkle and glow, as the bright light from the

door she had just stepped out of radiated upon her like an ethereal moonbeam, cast down from the heavens. She wore a matching, violet veil, which hung freely across her back and shoulders, flourishing like a drawn back wedding veil. It was adorned with a pair of fragrant, fine, White Orchids " worn the way a girl might wear flowers in her hair. From her fingertips to her shoulders, her arms were enveloped by a pair of exquisite, white silk gloves. And it all molded itself so elegantly, so perfectly to her form. There were no tool belts, no devices, no weapons across her back, or knives on her boots. There was only this radiant, masked maiden, and the perfect curves of her body...

"W... W-Wow...!" Shepard stuttered in a dreamy eyed stupor, as he popped up off the bed. "Tali... You look amazing...!"

"You think so...?" She questioned, somewhat bashfully, holding her hands together at her stomach, with her head tucked between her shoulders, as she timidly walked over to him.

"And look at you..." She said, as she reached out, and tugged at his lapel, straightening it out, before rubbing her hands down his chest. "You look so handsome and dashing..." He smiled. "You know, it's been years since I've worn a dress like this... I was afraid you wouldn't like it."

"Wouldn't like it?" He scoffed at the notion. "Tali, I love it...! In fact..." A wicked grin came over his face. "Come here!" He said with a laugh, as he wrapped his arms around her waist, and pulled her down onto the bed, on top of him.

"No! John!" She screamed with a giggle, as they bounced onto the mattress. "Stop! Sto-hahahop! You'll mess up my veil!"

After a brief, playful tussle, Tali rolled to one side, as their laughter and giggling slowly began to dwindle - and the two now laid together, face to face on the bed, each gazing into the other's eyes.

"Tali... I think you look absolutely beautiful tonight."

"Oh, John. That's so sweet..." She replied tenderly, as her silken gloved hand began to softly caress his face. She breathed a despondent sigh, as her eyes suddenly grew sad. "I hate this suit sometimes..." She uttered in a lamented voice. "Why can't... I want to be able to touch you whenever I want... To feel your touch... Your warmth... Without having to worry about my damn immuno-boosters, or getting sick..."

Shepard was silent for a moment, as he requited a solemn, sorrowful look.

"I know, Tali..." He eventually replied in a whisper, gently caressing the side of her helmet. "But you know something...? As long as I have those gorgeous eyes of yours..."

Those gorgeous eyes, sparkling like diamonds, that seemed to reflect a joy, and a sorrow... A longing, and a fulfillment all at once.

"Those eyes that could steal a spacer from the stars..." Shepard

added, coaxing Tali into a light giggle. "What more could I ever ask for?"

He pulled her closely, wrapping his strong arms around her, as he kissed the tip of her faceplate.

"I love you..." She whispered inaudibly, as they laid there together, lost in silence for several moments.

Suddenly, there came an unexpected sound.

"Oh, who could that be?" Tali inquired, with a gripe - the two slowly sitting up on the bed, as the sound of their state-room's door chime echoed loudly.

"I dunno... I wasn't expecting anyone." Shepard declared, as he stood up and brushed down his tux. "I'll go see who it is."

He slowly walked out of the bedroom, and into the sitting room, just as the chime sounded again.

"I'm coming!" He called out, somewhat aggravated, as he reached the door.

He reached his hand out to the holographic panel, causing the door to swish open. Upon its retraction, he immediately had to shield his eyes, as a bright, blinding light pierced his pupils.

"Legion...?" He questioned in befuddlement, squinting, as his eyes slowly adjusted.

"Hello again, Commander Shepard!" A familiar, overly-eager, female voice called out, as he was suddenly able to make out a woman's silhouette, standing beside a hovering camera, equipped with a bright video light.

"Oh, it's you again..." Shepard remarked, less than excited, as he lowered the hand shielding his face, when his pupils adapted to the light. He quickly recognized the obnoxious reporter from the previous night, now wearing a fashionable sky blue and white dress. "Catherine wasn't it...? Or should I just call you 'the mole'?"

"Uh-actually, it was Cameron... Cameron McClane." She timidly corrected. "And I'm sorry about that sneaky business in the dinning hall, last night. But, I-I was wondering if I could have just a moment of your time to ask you a few questions...?" She beckoned with a pleading, puppy-dog look in her eye.

"Sorry, I don't think so..." He refuted, as he reached his hand out to close the door.

"No, wait!" She begged, briefly impeding him. "Please, I really need this story! Just one quick interview...? That's all I'm asking."

"And that's all I'll need to finally knock that damn Khalisah Al-Jilani off her high horse..." She muttered under her breath, turning her face and her eyes away slightly.

The Commander rolled his eyes back, and slouched his shoulders down,

as he exhaled a deep sigh.

"Listen, Miss..." He began, in an assertive yet empathetic tone. "I understand that you're only doing your job. Now understand this... Me and my team have been beaten... shot... swarmed... mauled... electrocuted... and nearly crushed and cooked alive... We're on this cruise to FINALLY get a little rest and relaxation... Not to do interviews..."

"But...!"

"And as you can see..." He abruptly continued, cutting the defeated reporter off before she could get a word in edgewise, as he pointed his hands towards himself, to show off his tux. "I've got an important engagement tonight. So if you'll excuse me."

"Yeah, but could you just...!"

Without a second thought, or another word, Shepard closed shut the door, leaving the ambitious young reporter with a pouty expression, and aspirations unfulfilled...

"Yeah, an important engagement..." He whispered nervously to himself, as he turned from the door and walked back into the room. He breathed a quick, worried, sigh, as a cool chill washed over him. "At least I will if everything goes well..."

* * *

><p>Gordon took a long look all around the large, luxurious bathroom, as he vigorously rubbed his damp hair with the towel hanging around his neck. He wore a plain white undershirt, and a pair of light blue lounge pants, as he studied the room with a perplexed expression on his face.<p>

The bathroom was done up in an exquisite bronze finish. The counter seemed to be made up of a sleek, contemporary, scratched bronze metal, with a black marble top. And the floors were patterned in gold and white granite checkerboard. But the thing that had the Doctor confused, was that the main wall, where one would normally find a medicine cabinet, was simply barren. All except for two parallel, black bars that ran straight up and down the wall, about four feet apart " which seemed to serve absolutely no purpose whatsoever.

"Hmph..." Gordon scoffed under his breath, as he gazed around, unimpressed. "State-of-the-art staterooms, and there isn't even a mirror in the bathroom..."

Just then, the moment he made a mention of it, a bright light flashed before his eyes, as the two parallel bars lit up, and projected a large, holographic screen in front of him. It took a second to come into focus, but when it did, it presented a holographic reflection of himself, as crystal clear as any mirror.

"Whoa..." He uttered in surprised contentment, with a grin. He waved his hand up and down in front of it, watching as the holographic projection reflected his every motion in perfect synchronicity. "Heh, neat!"

"Will there be anything else I can do for you, sir?"

Gordon jumped, a bit startled, and quickly looked around, as an unfamiliar woman's voice in the room unexpectedly called out to him.

"What? Who sai..." As he began, a newfound, bright blue beacon of light caught his eye, coming from the far corner of the bathroom counter. But without his glasses, or his substitute visor, it was difficult to make out. However, as he squinted his eyes, the light source did seem to possess the shape of some humanoid figure.

He quickly snatched up the dark outline of the visor he'd been using, from the counter. He opened it, placed it onto his face, hooked the temples around his ears, and switched on the power. As the visor came online, bringing with it various readouts, and targeting systems, his vision quickly came back into focus.

He looked down to see the bright, cerulean, holographic shape of a diminutive asari woman, cheerfully smiling up at him.

"Oh, another AI." He stated, as he examined the figure being projected. "Hello."

"Correction." She immediately refuted. "I am not an AI, but rather a VI. A virtual intelligence. I am programmed to simulate cognizant behavior, and help you in any way possible. I am Evianna, your fully interactive virtual cruise attendant! I can provide you with information about activities, and events happening across the ship, order room service for you, set wake up calls, and many other tasks simply upon request. So... Will there be anything else I can do for you, sir?"

"Uhm..." He thought for a moment, as he rolled his eyes up towards the ceiling, before looking back down at his holographic reflection. He stopped and rubbed the sides of his jaw, lined with thick stubble. His goatee too was getting a tad ratty, as it had been a while since he'd shaved. "Hmm..." He hummed pensively, as he turned back down towards the VI. "Any chance I could get some shaving gear?"

"Of course, sir!" She cheerfully assured, as a small compartment door slid open on the counter, besides the sink, and a tiny lift raised a small, silver device, on a stand.

"Hmm..." Gordon uttered with a furrowed brow, as he reached out and plucked the device off the stand. It didn't seem unlike most other modern razors, save for the fact that this one didn't appear to possess any visible blades. "Definitely not like the razor I use back on the Normandy..."

Just then, he spotted the small power switch at the base of the device, which he quickly flipped on with his opposite hand. Immediately, the apparatus buzzed in his grip, as the opposite end lit up with a dull, orange light. He turned it right side up, and examined it closely. The light was a small holographic projection at the tip of the razor, taking the shape of a blade, where a metallic blade would normally be. With one eyebrow raised, and despite his better judgment, his curiosity enticed him to bring his fingertip up to the holographic blade. Cautiously he drew his finger closer to it. Feeling no heat given off, he continued to draw his finger closer,

until it simply passed through the dull projection, without any effect whatsoever.

"What...?" He muttered to himself, with a perplexed look on his face. "How is this supposed to..."

Just then, he decided to give the strange contraption the benefit of the doubt. He raised it towards his face, and turned his cheek to the mirror, carefully observing out of the corner of his eyes. He brought up the blade, as he would any other razor, and with a light stroking motion, slid it down his cheek. Amazingly, he didn't feel a thing â€" but the instant the projection came in contact with his facial hair, the light intensified into a bright red-orange, and it sliced through his sturdy stubble with ease, blazing a small path of smooth to the touch skin.

"Hah! Fascinating!" Gordon exclaimed with a laugh, as he pulled the razor away, and examined it triumphantly. "Hard light razors. How about that? From CRTs, to LCDs, to the age of the hologram." With a grin on his face, he raised the razor to his cheek again.

"Will there be anything else, sir?" Evianna's miniscule form questioned, before he could make the second cut. "Would you care to listen to some music while you shave, perhaps?"

"Uh, sure..." He stopped, and looked down at her. "What would you recommend?"

"I'm sorry..." She requited. "But I am not programmed to make that kind of qualified judgment. However, my databanks contain an endless variety of music of every genre, from most eras, of every race."

"Uh, okay..." He said, before rolling his eyes up towards the ceiling contemplatively. "How about something from Earth. Late twentieth century?"

At his request, the bathroom was suddenly filled with the harmonious melody of music. Well... It was filled with music anyway. The blaring metal sound of guitar riffs, blazing basses, and pounding drums echoed off the walls, and shook the entire room, causing Gordon to cringe one eye â€" the music obviously not being to his taste.

"Uh... Hey!" He shouted over the music, as he plugged one ear with his free hand. "H-How about something a little different...? Maybe something more festive... And not as loud!"

Just then... The beating of a bongo. The shaking of maracas. The ringing of a triangle. It all crescendoed, when all of a sudden...

"Her name was Lola! She was a showgirl! With yellow flowers in her hair! And her dress cut down to there!"

"You gotta be ki-hahaha!" Gordon wasn't able to contain his laughter, as the sound of disco flooded the room. "Eh... Why not?" He cheerfully conceded, with a shrug of his shoulders, as he raised the razor and began shaving away around his goatee.

"She would merengue! And do the cha-cha! And while she tried to be a star, Tony always tended bar! Oh, at the Copa! Copa Cabana! The hottest spot north of Havana!"

Miranda turned to look towards the bathroom door, with a peculiar look in her eyes, at the strange, ancient, muffled music, before simply smiling, and shrugging it off. She turned back, and walked around the bed, towards the bedroom dresser — the stiletto heels of her bright red, satin pumps digging into the carpet with every step she took.

They matched her lavish evening gown utterly and entirely. A silky, rouge ensemble, that majestically enveloped her figure, alluringly slit up to her right thigh. It was accented by an elegant, white, chiffon lace sash, which she wore draped across her person, from her right hip, flowing freely over her left shoulder. And her neck and ears were bejeweled by stunning rubies, worn in sterling silver settings.

"Mirror." She called out, as she laid a small cosmetic box down on the dresser, and opened it. A bright flash of light flickered, before materializing into a perfect reflective projection.

The small cosmetic box she held contained one solid color of eye shadow inside; a dull brown. That is until Miranda took hold of a small slider on the left hand side of box, and meticulously began to draw it back and forth, causing the color to instantly change in hue. She stopped, as she suddenly shifted the eye shadow to a brilliant shade of sky blue. Far too brilliant in fact, which is why she then began to shift a separate slider along the bottom of the box from right to left. The color slowly began to lighten, and fade, in conjunction with her motions, until she found the perfect color. A chromatic silver; a dusky gray with just a light splash of blue hue. Pleased, she took up the small brush applicator, lightly dabbed it inside of the colored square, and closed one eye, as she brought it up, and began artistically applying it.

A few moments of precise brush strokes left a smoky glow beneath her left brow. Pleased with the result, she grinned subtly, and closed her right eye to start again. Unexpectedly, there was a ring at the door.

"Ugh..." Miranda let out a disgruntled sigh, as she shook her head, and tried to expedite her self beautification. "I'll be right there!" She shouted, as she quickly dabbed her eyelid.

Finding her work done, she set down the brush, and turned to walk out of the bedroom, into the sitting room. As she reached the entrance, she activated the door's holographic panel, causing it to slide open, with a swish. And as the doorway unfurled, she too was suddenly greeted by a blinding beam of light.

"Oh..." A woman's voice uttered in displeased surprise, as Miranda squinted, and shielded her eyes. "I-it's you..." Miranda heard her stutter nervously, as her vision came back into focus.

"What do you want?" Miranda demanded, with an angry sneer.

"Uh..." The reporter began uneasily, turning her eyes away, and taking an intimidated step back. "I... I was hoping I could have a

word with Gordon Freeman. Or at least the alleged Gordon Freeman..." She turned back to look at Miranda, with a beseeching expression, and a fidgety shrug of her shoulders.

Miranda didn't say a word. She simply stood there, glaring a hard look straight through the other woman. The kind of glare one might give a stubborn stain that just wouldn't wash out. In the midst of the awkward silence, as Cameron batted her eyes around, waiting to be placated with a response, be it conceding or damning â€" the phrase "if looks could kill" more than likely crossed her mind at least once..."

"Or... Perhaps, YOU'D care to share a few comments?" McClane beckoned, with a nervous, albeit eager smile. "I'd love to get statements from anyone on Commander Shepard's crew! The people wanna know the real story of the fall of the Reapers. And I'm just... trying to give them that story. Whadaya say, Miss?"

The only response Miranda gave, was that she crossed her arms. Her stern gaze, and cold demeanor remained unflinching. She possessed the full semblance of a brick wall, forcing a single, icy bead of sweat to run down McClane's right temple.

"Uhm..." The daunted reporter uttered again, fearful of the biotic's wrath. "I... I can see I caught you at a bad time... Maybe it'd be more convenient if I came back later..." She said, seeking approval, as she sank her head between her shoulders. But the statuesque Miranda simply stood there, with nary an utterance.

"Right..." McClane submitted, as she materialized her omni-tool, and used it to switch off the hovering camera's light. "In that case, uh... I'll be on my way. Have a good evening, ma'am..." McClane gave Miranda a brief, dumbfounded smile, before quickly turning, and proceeding away down the hall, with the inactive, hovering camera following in tow.

Miranda closed the door, and turned back around to face the sitting room. "Hmph..." She released a light laugh, as her sneer began to fade. Just then, a gleeful smile slowly crept in on her face, as she began shaking her head. "Hmhmhmhmhmh..." She chuckled under her breath, unable to contain herself. "He's right. The silent thing does work pretty well..."

With a carefree shake of her head, she walked back into the bedroom, only to encounter the heroic Free Man engaged in an epic struggle!

"Does this go over or under...? Oh I see! This must go... Wait... No, that can't be right..." Gordon muttered to himself, with his back towards Miranda, oblivious to her presence, as he stood half-dressed in the middle of the bed room, tussling with his clothing.

The only thing he'd managed to successfully put on so far were a pair of black socks, and his midnight black dress pants, lined down each leg with a silky black stripe. He did have the matching white dress shirt on, unfastened, which was clearly giving him more than his share of difficulty. And to complete the ensemble, his tuxedo jacket was neatly laid out on the bed, beside him. Although, by the look of things, it would be a while before he would get to it...

"Now, where did this thing come from? Was I supposed to fasten this first...?"

"Just how is it-" Miranda began, with traces of playful sarcasm in her voice, causing Gordon quickly swing himself around. "-that the great Gordon Freeman can devise a way to stop an entire fleet of Reapers using only his gravity gun, and yet he can't figure out the right way to put on a tux?"

"Heh, I don't think it takes a physicist to put this on..." Gordon replied jokingly. "I think it takes an engineer..."

Miranda bowed and shook her head, with a warm, compassionate smile on her face, as if to say "Oh, you...". As she walked up to him, she reached out, took hold of his loosely hanging shirt, and carefully prepared to properly button it up. Gordon raised his hand up, which cupped about a dozen or so fine silver buttons. The front face of each button glistened with an elegant, black onyx design. Miranda reached into his palm, plucking out the buttons one by one, as she adeptly worked them into his shirt, and fastened them with a click. As she put them into place, they began to form elegant, twin columns of fasteners down his chest, over the front of his spotless, white dress shirt.

"I swear I'll never figure this stuff out..." He uttered, with a bit of a remorseful, homesick, tone. "I mean whatever happened to bow ties and waistcoats?"

"Bow ties...?" Miranda questioned, with a mildly facetious snicker, as she furrowed her brow. "Why not? Might as well throw in a ruffled shirt, and a cavalier hat while we're at..." Just then, she stopped mid-sentence and looked up at Gordon, with a shamed expression on her face, when she suddenly realized how boorish she must've sounded.

"I... I-I'm sorry..." She submitted, stuttering, with a genuine repent in her eyes. "That was incredibly insensitive of me... I didn't mean to insult you. I know you're still adjusting, and how hard it must be for you, here."

"Hey, it's okay, relax..." Gordon assured with a comforting smile. "Don't worry, it didn't bother me..."

The comment itself may not have bothered him, but truthfully, despite a cheerful facade, he did catch his mind wandering, more often than not, to thoughts of his painful past. Thoughts of the one he lost. Thoughts which were almost always accompanied with an inherent guilt...

"Besides... I was never too savvy with the tuxedos of my day, either. I'm good at a lot of things, but fashion ain't one of 'em." He said with a jovial snicker.

Relieved, Miranda smiled adoringly back up at Gordon. She placed her right arm around him, caressing the hair on the back of his head, before drawing him closer, and pressing her lips against his. They stood there for a moment, indulging deeply in each other's lips â€" a passionate moment lost in time. When they pulled apart, they simply reflected a look of mutual adoration, in their respective eyes.

"You look radiant tonight, by the way..." Gordon complimented softly, as Miranda took the largest, and final sparking button from his hand â€" A polished, black onyx stud, with a sterling silver outline, about the diameter of a twentieth century half dollar coin.

"Thank you..." Miranda conveyed, with a bashful look in her eyes â€" the rosy blush on her cheeks perhaps concealing a natural one.

"You sure you wanna go to this thing?" Gordon queried, somewhat ambivalently, as Miranda took hold of both ends of his banded collar, and held them together, overlapping tightly.

"Yeah." Miranda acknowledged, without reservation, as she affixed the final button stud into his collar. "It's supposed to be a big gala event tonight, in the Nirasha Lounge."

"That's what I'm afraid of..." Gordon retorted uneasily.

"Just think of it this way..." Miranda appealed, as she finished, and rubbed her hand down his shirt, straightening it out. "It'll be our first, real date together. And I want it to be a memorable one..." She gazed up at him, giving him a playfully pleading look with her eyes. "Please?"

"...Do I have a choice...?" He asked with a chuckle.

"Not really." Miranda affirmed jokingly, as she turned, and picked his jacket up off the bed.

She turned back around, and held it up, spread apart, coaxing Gordon to work his arms into the sleeves. He slid it on over his shoulders, and tugged at the lapel, as he turned around to face Miranda.

The midnight black jacket was accented with a pristine white lining, running around the collar, and down both edges of the front. The front pocket of his coat was also lined with an emphasizing white stripe, as was bottom layer, of his layered, shawl lapel. A large, glistening, onyx button fastened his banded collar snugly, under his chin. And the two columns of similar, smaller buttons, ran down the front of his shirt, lining it like an officer's uniform.

Gordon stood there, straightening out his clothing - the goatee on his face precisely rounded off, surrounded by perfectly smooth skin, and his hair neatly slicked back, as Miranda eyed him from top to bottom with a desirous eye.

"Mmm..." Miranda uttered, pleasantly enticed. "Hello handsome..."

* * *

><p>A man in uniform walked down a long, nondescript, hallway with a clear purpose. He was a human â€" an Asian male, middle aged, somewhere in his mid to late forties. He had a black, crew cut, head of hair, and medium-light skin. His casual, short sleeved, blue uniform was not as formal as one might expect from an officer of his stature, but still quite distinctive in and of itself. On his left chest, he wore a silver badge, with an engraved name tag over it that read: Security Commander Andrew Kim.<p>

But this man's most distinctive feature was his right eye â€" or

perhaps its vacancy. A deep rift spanned from over his separated right brow, straight down to the center of his right cheek, like a fault line. A crevice marking a very old wound, likely from his days of spry youth and combat. And his eye... His eye was a milky marble. A plain, white sclera, without a pupil " only a fog white orb at the center, where a pupil once sat. In contrast, his other eye, his only eye, was a piercing brown, which almost seemed to swirl, and fade into blackness, like the depths of a water well.

The sound of each step he took clanged against the solid steel grate floor. This was not one of the Illustria's lavish, luxury corridors. There were no fine chandeliers, or gleaming golden hand rails. There was no cashmere carpeting, or exotic, alien flora. The dull metal walls weren't even painted " except for the black paint stenciling the letters "RESTRICTED AREA" intermittently, on the walls between the doors lining the corridor.

Straight ahead, at the end of the hallway, where it split into a T, was a secure looking door, and the target of Commander Kim's endeavor. Standing guard on either side of this door, labeled "Systems Operations Room " No Unauthorized Personnel" in bold, red letters, were two serious looking security officers, a drell and a turian. They stood well disciplined, with their chins up, their chests jutted forward, and their arms locked stoically behind their backs, as their eyes fixed onto their approaching, uniformed, superior.

Kim's steps slowed as he reached the juncture, eventually coming to a full stop before the two men, a few feet shy of the door. Neither of them dared speak a word to the hard man before them, as he silently inspected them in turn. He first looked over the drell, locking eyes with his, and waiting patiently, as if searching for some sign of reluctance or protest. He then turned to the turian, and glared into his steely silver eyes, with the same, dissecting look.

Just then, in a near simultaneous motion, both guards simply turned their heads and looked away, in opposite directions from the door, with a blind eye. Kim grinned, as he raised his arm, and materialized his omni-tool, before swiping it down, before the door's red holographic panel.

"Verifying..." A monotonous, female voice announced, matching the words displayed on the small, holographic read out. "Bio-signature recognized. Identity Confirmed. Welcome, Commander Kim."

A loud thud came, as the door immediately unlocked, followed by a hissing sound, as it slowly slid open. When it had fully retracted, Kim took a deep breath, followed by a long exhalation, as he stepped into the room, leaving the turian and the drell behind at their posts.

Inside, the room was alive with the buzzing, beeping, and low hum of a plethora of computer systems. It was a virtual metropolis of hardware. Rows of machines, standing like the skyscrapers of a city " their multiple, flashing, holographic displays lit up like the windows of a building. Just as a ship's engines are it's heart, truly this room was it's brain. The nerve center of the Carmenta Illustria...

Kim strolled slowly across the aisles of instrumentation, examining

the respective labels above each terminal carefully.

"Communication Control" "Navigation Control" "Life Support" "Engine Control" He read the names out in his head, as he passed them. That's when he saw what he was looking for. "Radar and Imaging".

He quickly took a small device out of his pocket, as he rushed down the narrow aisle, towards the corresponding terminal. The device he withdrew was a small disk, about three or four inches in diameter. A red, flashing light streaked around the disk's circumference, circumnavigating it in a continuous loop.

When he reached the terminal, he set the flashing optical storage device down beside him, and summoned a holographic keyboard. After a few moments of tentative keystrokes, a small tray slid out from the terminal, down near the floor, close to his feet. In it, was another flashing OSD, much like the one Kim carried â€" the only difference being, this one was blue instead of red.

Without any sort of noticeable qualms, or hesitation, Kim quickly crouched down, removed the blue disk from its tray, and replaced it with his own, before sliding the ejected tray back into the machine.

* * *

><p>"I'm serious, Franklin..." Captain Ryback declared, as he conversed with one of his officers, on the bridge. "I honestly think he's the real Gordon Freeman..."<p>

The man he conversed with; a short, stocky, pasty skinned gentlemen, somewhere in his mid fifties, was the only other human on the bridge. A bridge occupied by mostly asari officers, with the exception of two salarians, and an odd turian. The human officer sat reclined at one of the many terminals in the studio apartment sized bridge, casually chatting with the Captain, but still fairly attentive of his work station.

"I dunno, sir... I mean, it makes sense and all, but it's still a little far fetched, don't you think?" Franklin inquired dubiously, in a somewhat high pitched voice, as the Captain took another brief sip from his steaming cup of coffee. "How can you really be sure it's him?"

Ryback breathed an uncertain sigh, as he lowered his cup away from his lips, and shook his head. "I dunno..." He replied. "I guess I can't be sure. But there was definitely something about this man... Like... Like the way he spoke about the Rebellion. It's one thing to read about it in the historical codices. But the way he described it... I'd swear he was actually there..."

"Plus, I'm tellin' you, Franklin. If you get a look at him... He'll be the splitting image of every Gordon Freeman pict..."

"Sir!" One of the asari crew members, at a separate station, called out, with a severe sense of urgency in her voice, quickly interrupting the Captain. "We seem to be having a bit of... of... Wait..."

"What is it, D'Lana?" The Captain beckoned, as he immediately rushed

over to her.

The summoning asari took a moment to respond, as she looked over her instruments " her brow furrowed in confusion. "Uh... Nothing, sir..."

"Nothing!" The Captain demanded, unsatisfied with the answer.

"Well, sir... For a moment, it seemed like our radar systems were malfunctioning." D'Lana informed, as she diligently continued working away at her terminal, to assure its functionality. "But the problem looks like it corrected itself. All readings look normal. Must've just been a hiccup in the system..." She assured, as she tilted her head up towards Ryback, giving him a calm shrug of her shoulders.

"Hmm..." Ryback uttered pensively, clenching his lips. "Run a full diagnostic." He ordered. "Make sure a hiccup is all it was..."

"Aye sir, right away."

* * *

><p>Commander Kim examined the blue OSD gripped between his fingers. With it firmly in his possession, he bent down, and ever so carefully placed the flashing disk onto the cold, hard floor. As he stood back up, with an odious grin, and a look of contempt, he raised his foot, and suddenly slammed it down hard, crushing the small device under the heel of his boot. Tiny chunks, and pieces of plastic and metal debris slid out in all directions, leaving the primary, shattered mass behind. With a quick sweeping motion of his foot, Kim lightly kicked the miniscule mound of demolished circuitry aside, sweeping most of it under the terminal tower. With his work completed, he then turned around, and proceeded back out of the room.<p>

The drell and the turian standing watch outside could hear each quick step of their Commander's hard soled boots, as he approached the doorway, before finally stepping out, into the hall, in front of them.

"Steady, gentlemen..." He announced, in a coarse, grizzled voice, though not actually turning around to face them. "It won't be long now..."

5. Chapter 5: A Schedule to Keep Part I

****Salvation: Episode I " The Taking of the Carmenta Illustria****

Disclaimer: This fan-fiction is part of an episodic series taking place after Salvation: A Half-Life/Mass Effect Universe Fan Fiction, which will lead directly to its sequel, Salvation II: Project Prometheus. These episodes and sequel take place OUTSIDE of the Mass Effect 3 continuity. Characters property of their respective companies, Half-Life created by Valve and Mass Effect created by Bioware.

****Chapter 5: A Schedule to Keep (Part I)****

****Double Date****

Could it be true? Could this all be real? For so long, it seemed like his struggle would never end, and he never imagined it would... Or at least he never dreamed he'd live to see an end to it... But now, as he walked down one of the Illustria's many lavish corridors, dressed not in a uniform, or armor, but in the finest evening formal wear, with his quarian queen on his arm, he couldn't help but feel a little light headed...

As the two walked down the wide open hallway, with a high-reaching, cathedral-like ceiling, along side many other stately dressed patrons, likely on their way to the same function on this deck, John just couldn't seem to take his eyes off her... He had never seen her like this before. And it wasn't just the shimmering dress of violet satin that she wore, no, there was a glow about her, a radiance. She walked with a child-like eagerness, looking around, and taking in every last sight her two eyes could handle. And although he couldn't see it behind her dark mask, he knew she wore a big smile on her face. And that's what meant the most to him.

At that moment, the realization solidified within his head. This WAS real. After so many lives lost, after all the bloodshed and the fighting, the death and the devastation; the Reapers, at long last, were dead - and at his side was the woman that he loved. Tonight nothing else mattered. This would be their night, and nothing was going to rui...

"H-Hey!" A loud, grating voice suddenly bellowed above the chattering passengers, and the faint, muffled sound of music coming from the distance.

"Commander Shepard! A moment of your time, sir!" The same voice bawled again, only this time they spotted the person responsible.

He was a tall, burly, rotund gentleman, wearing a modern day Tuxedo, much like Shepard's, however accessorized with an old-fashioned, western string tie, in the shape of a bull's head, with gemstones for eyes, and topped off with a pitch black, western style hat.

He weaved through the coming and going crowd, fixated on the couple, with a cockeyed grin on his face, and a thick, lit cigar gripped in his right hand. The Commander rolled his eyes a bit, with a grimace on his face, as the portly man approached. Up ahead in the distance, at the top of a small flight of red carpeted stairs, two grand golden doors, beneath a bright holographic sign that read "The Nirasha Lounge" seemed so tantalizingly out of reach...

Each time a baronial dressed passenger stepped in or out, the golden doors would swing open, and the muffled rhythms coming from within would radiate a little more vibrantly and alluringly. This vacation was supposed to be a chance at a little rest, relaxation, and romance. But between an obnoxious reporter, the unexpected spectacle at dinner the previous evening, and now this space cowboy... Well, it wasn't exactly turning out to be what he had hoped for.

"Hot damn, I was hoping I'd get to meet ya!" The burly gentleman exclaimed in a southern accent, as he reached the two, and immediately extended a hand out towards the Commander.

"Boy, I tell ya, this is such an honor. Meeting the great Commander Shepard himself..." He continued, heartily shaking Shepard's hand for a brief moment, before releasing it.

"Ma'am..." He said to Tali, as he turned to her, and cordially tipped his hat. "The name's Jesse. Jesse Delaroza."

"Hello." Tali replied.

"Yeah, nice to meet you..." Shepard added, apathetically. "But, if you'll excu..."

"Wh-hoa! Hold on just a second there, partner." He quickly imposed, cutting the Commander off. "If you don't mind, I'd really love for you to meet the Misses."

"Hey!" He yelled out across the wide open hallway, followed by a sharp whistle, towards an asari dressed in a strapless, dark blue, sequin dress, chit-chatting with a hanar couple. "Come on over here sugar bun, and meet Commander Shepard!"

The slender figured asari quickly excused herself with a polite smile, and turned to walk over toward the three.

"Argh..." Shepard groaned in his own mind, as he reeled his head back, and slouched his shoulders. He briefly glanced over at Tali, who didn't really seem to be minding the interruption. And normally he wouldn't either, but this evening was special. He had things all planned out, and he had a schedule to keep... Tonight, everything had to go off without a hitch.

"Captain Anderson was right..." He thought to himself, with an indiscernible shake of his head, and an inaudible sigh. "It's so much easier to be a soldier than a diplomat..."

"Commander." The presumptuous gentleman announced, as he placed his arm behind the waist of his asari spouse. "This here purdy lady is my blue desert flower, Lilandra."

"Lilly, say hello to Commander Shepard, and..." He hesitated for a moment, as he turned to Tali. "I beg your pardon lil' lady, but I didn't quite catch the name at dinner, last night. It was uh... Tammy, wasn't it...?"

"Tali, actually..." The finely adorned quarian politely corrected. "Tali'Zorah."

"Ah, well then. Sugar bun, say hello to Commander Shepard, and Taleh'Zorah!"

"It is such a delight to meet you both..." The asari graciously expressed, as she extended a dainty, delicate hand out towards Tali and John, who subsequently requited a brief shake. "Everything I've seen on the news vids about the attacks on Earth and the Citadel... It's so tragic. But then how you were able to stop those things... It's just... Well, it's just so gallant and incredible. Thank the goddess we have heroes like yourselves. Again, truly... truly an honor to meet you both..."

"Why... thank you..." Tali humbly acknowledged. "That means a

lot..."

Shepard's hard expression softened a bit, as modest grin came over his face. He turned to Tali for a moment, who more than likely reflected a similar countenance under her mask.

"Yes, it does... Thank you." The Commander bestowed in a modest tone, gently nodding his head. "And it was no easy victory. But it's like I tell everyone, we're a team. And we've all..."

"Nyrik and Delana Dreven! Is that you?!" The upper crust asari suddenly shouted out, when she noticed a stately dressed turian couple walking by, much to the Commander's surprise.

"Oh, If you'll excuse me for just a moment..." She beseeched with a tone of snide, fraudulent hospitality. "Again, truly, truly a honor to meet you both." She declared, before turning and rushing off. "Oh my goddess! How dare you two come on this cruise, and not tell us you're here...!"

"Hehe, oh that Lilly o' mine..." The pretentious, overbearing cowboy said with a laugh, as he came to stand beside Shepard, giving him one good, solid pat on the back. "She loves to mingle, and I love to watch her..."

"Yeah, swell..." Shepard concurred with a heavy hint of aggravation, and a grimace on his face, after reeling slightly from the annoying pat on his back. "Well, if we're done here, we'll be..."

"Whoa, whoa! Wait a second!" Delaroza pleaded, quickly rushing out in front of the two, as they took a step forward, stopping them before they could proceed, and causing Shepard to ball the hand he had hangin at his side into a fist â€" his patience, much like his temper, started to wear thin. But it was only for a moment, before he quickly remembered his surroundings.

"Actually, there's something very important I'd like to talk to you about, Commander..."

Shepard sighed, as he unclenched his fist. "Make it quick..."

"Well I've got a bit of a business proposition for you, good sir!" The assertive westerner declared. "Now first off, allow me to RE-introduce myself. I am Jesse Delaroza. And in case that name doesn't ring any bells, that is Jesse Delaroza; chairman, CEO, and all around head honcho of the Nautilus Motor Company..."

"Really?!" Tali exclaimed. "Wow, that's impressive!"

Shepard on the other hand, simply stood there, with his eyes rolled up towards the ceiling, inattentively bobbing his head back and forth, waiting for this man to make his point.

"Yes indeedy, lil' lady." Delaroza continued, tipping his hat with a large, salesman's grin on his face. "Now I'll reckon your beau here drives a Nautilus skycar, right?" He queried, as he pointed toward Shepard with a slick grin on his face. "Classy guy like you. It's so nice to drive Nauti, am I right?"

"Not exactly." The Commander replied, rolling his eyes around and not

doing a particularly good job of masking his utter lack of interest.

"No? Well, don't you worry none about that, C'mander!" Delaroza ambitiously assured, as he drew his arm around Shepard's shoulders, and shook it back and forth. "We can remedy that right quick! How does a brand new 2186 Nautilus Triton zX7 sound?"

"Like a busted airlock!" Shepard asserted angrily, as he turned to face the westerner, quickly removing his hand from his shoulders. "Now if you've got a point, make it. I don't got all night."

Tali tittered a bit at John's overdue outburst. After all, she did say once that it was fun watching him shout. The westerner reeled for a moment, with a bit of a wide eyed gaze â€" obviously a little intimidated by Shepard's commanding assertion.

"Uh..." He stuttered a bit, before recollecting his thoughts. "Y-Yeah! Of course... Good man, straight and to the point. You're a no nonsense kinda guy, Commander. And that's why you'd be perfect!" He shook a finger at Shepard and grinned, as he tried to hide his newfound apprehensions. Although this was easily betrayed by the beads of perspiration starting to glisten on his forehead. "Now, what I wanna propose to you, is a bit of a business relationship. M-More of a partnership really... I'd like you... To be the new spokesperson... for Nautilus Motors..."

Shepard rolled his eyes, and exhaled a mixture of a grunt and a sigh, as he shook his head.

"Come on, Tali..." He insisted, as he placed his arm behind her back, and the two began walking forward again, towards the muffled sound of music beating from within the club.

"W-Y-You don't gotta make up your mind right now!" Delaroza pleaded, as he watched his prospect begin to slip away. "Why don't you just sleep on it?!" He begged, as he followed along â€" his pleas falling on deaf ears. "I mean you're the biggest thing in the news! You're the genuine article. The Real McCoy! A human hero, tried and true! Don't you think after all you've done, you should get a little something in return?! I can make you a wealthy man, Commander! All I'm asking is a few commercials... The use of your likeness on some billboards, and whatnot... I mean you tell me that's not worth your while!"

"Hey!" Tali suddenly chimed in, as she noticed someone in the streams of patrons, flocking to the club gala. "Look, isn't that Miranda, and Dr. Freeman?" She pointed out, as they approached with the oncoming crowd.

"Oh, yeah. It is." Shepard concurred.

"Hey, so uh... Whaddaya say, Commander?!" The insistent Delaroza beckoned, as he tagged along behind Shepard, like an eager dog wanting a treat. "You'll think about it, right?"

"Hey, you two..." John greeted, paying a deaf ear to the enthused westerner, as he and Tali intercepted the other couple's path.

"Hey...!" The scarlet dressed Miranda jovially reciprocated, as they stopped to share salutations. "Hello Tali... Commander..." She nodded. "My, don't you two look fancy tonight."

"Yeah, likewise." Shepard assured with a smile, before turning to the Doctor and extending his hand. "Gordon..."

"Commander..." Gordon grinned and nodded, as the two tuxedo clad gentlemen shared a brief, friendly handshake.

"And Miss Tali." He continued, as he looked over at the quarian dressed in a luxurious, flowing, violet evening gown. "You're looking lovely this evening."

"Thank you."

"Uh, Shepard. I think that man is trying to get your attention..." Miranda stated, as she looked around his shoulder, and pointed at the boisterous, waving, Delaroza.

"What? Who...?" The Commander questioned, as he turned back around, only to find the same hat wearing figure as before. "Oh. You again..."

"Uh, yeah..." He stuttered a bit as he began. "I-I was just askin'... You'll think about my offer, right...?"

"Huh...? Oh, yeah sure. I'll think about it." John nonchalantly acknowledged, just to appease the stubborn westerner, before he turned back, and the four slowly continued on.

"Great...!" Delaroza exclaimed, with a somewhat reserved enthusiasm, as he was left behind. "Well, you just let that percolate a while! Oh! C-Can I get your omni-info before you g... W... Well you'll call me! My info's on our extranet site... Alright then, partner. I'll uh... I'll catch you later..."

"Yeah, You'll think about it, my foot..." He grumbled to himself, as he turned away with a grimace. "I know a brush off when I see one..."

"That feller with the visor, though..." He uttered to himself, as he furrowed his brow pensively. "He looked powerful familiar... Where have I seen him before...?"

"Oh well..." He shrugged off the notion, as he turned, and began to look around the busy corridor. "Lilly...!" He shouted out, not spotting his hobnobbing asari spouse. "Lilly...! Criminetly, where in the blue blazes has that blue bonnet run off to this time!"

"So, who was the cowboy?" Miranda queried, as the four proceeded forward in a small group, towards the flight of steps leading up to the twin golden doors.

"I dunno..." Shepard replied, indifferently. "Some Texas Eezo tycoon, or something. I wasn't really paying attention..."

"What was that strange headpiece he was wearing?" Tali asked. "Is that a human thing?"

"Heh..." The Commander chuckled a bit in response. "Yes, for a very strange, obnoxious type of human."

"Well, I like it..." The lavishly dressed quarian affirmed. "We should get one for you."

"Hehehehe..." Miranda giggled at the suggestion, while Gordon simply grinned and shook his bowed head, containing his laughter.

"Oh, no...!" Shepard refuted, in a stern, yet playful tone. "No way. Not in this... or any other lifetime!"

"We'll see..." Tali smugly offered up, as she held her head up high.

"Hehe... Oh, by the way Miranda. You look great tonight." The Commander genially complimented, looking over at her, as laughter came to an end.

"Oh, thank you Shepard." Miranda acknowledged, with a subtle smile. "That's sweet of you to say."

John nodded courteously. "And Gordon..." He began again. "You clean up nice, but you gotta do something about that visor..." He said, with mired traces of a snicker in his voice, as he looked at the out of place band of light strewn across the tuxedo clad physicist's eyes.

"Oh..." Gordon responded in a somewhat drab tone, as he briefly drew his hand over his brow, touching the metallic band on his forehead that generated the ribbon of light over his eyes. "Yeah, I know... First thing I'm doing after this cruise is over is getting my glasses fixed."

"Why don't you just get the ocular enhancement?" John questioned, as he turned around a bit to look over at Gordon, while they walked. "I mean everyone gets it as a kid, this day and age. It's as common as getting vaccinated..."

"Well, yeah, but... I like my glasses... I miss my glasses..."

With a carefree look, Shepard simply smiled and shrugged off the notion. After all, if Gordon Freeman was able to survive the worst laboratory accident in history, and subsequently fight off a race of alien overlords, before being put into stasis for nearly two centuries, only to be reawakened and plunged into the fray once again, all while wearing his iconic, black rimmed glasses, who was he to argue?

As the two couples walked blithely along, conversing and sharing good tidings, the rhythm emanating from the music up ahead grew louder with each step - every beat, every chord seemed to vibrate through the floor, and up into their feet. And the sound of the bass seemed to pound into their chests. Along either side of the long, lavish hallway, were doorways to various small clubs, bars, and restaurants. A comedy club on the left, a gift shop on the right - but the piece de rÃ©sistance of this deck, was undoubtedly the Nirasha Lounge.

"You know, I wasn't really expecting to see you two here tonight..."

The Commander stated, as they all reached the base of the scarlet cashmere carpeted flight of stairs, ascending to the lounge's twin gleaming, golden doors.

"Yeah, well..." Miranda began with a titter, glancing over at Gordon, as they walked up. "I practically had to drag this one along kicking and screaming."

Gordon laughed before he replied. "Just kicking, really..."

Just as the two couples reached the top of the stairs, the twin shimmering, gilded doors automatically swung open, like the pearly gates of heaven, granting them passage into paradise...

So far, everything about the Carmenta Illustria was beyond exquisite... It was everything the brochures had promised, and more. Fine dining, lavish settings, quality entertainment, and service fit to accommodate royalty. And this room, was no exception - the finest, and most elegant of all the clubs on-board the grand ship.

It was nearly as large, and every bit as breath taking as the ship's great dining hall, presented with all its lustrous opulence. Far to the right, a band of asari played an upbeat love ballad, on a grand, majestic stage, against a backdrop of starlight. The lofty ceiling, and upper walls were like a dome of flashing light, as their vibrant imagery changed to the beat of the music. Two staircases on either side of the main entrance, led up to a narrow balcony floor, overlooking the stage, and dance floor on either side. And below the encompassing balcony, prominent statues of asari lore, perhaps their goddesses and angels, stood tall, gazing over all in the room, from their nooks carved into the walls all around the dance club.

Small round tables and booths, draped with shimmering, satin table clothes, were scattered throughout the room; along either side the dance floor heart of the club, and lining the above balcony level. A small bar sat nestled far off, in a corner, to the back left, under a bright, vivid sign, adorned with an olive and a martini glass that read "Medley Bar". And all across the expansive, fine marble dance floor, passengers danced, and weaved "moving to the rhythmic beat of the music in perfect harmony.

Nearly everyone in the room was dressed in their finest formal ensembles - flowing gowns, and fancy suits. The music played, the room was dim, the champagne flowed, holographic lights flashed, and tipsy lovers spun their partners around on the dance floor. Tonight, only the biggest named artists from across the galaxy would be performing right here in this very room. Now this was a gala... This was a celebration... Now this was a party!

"Wow..." Gordon muttered under his breath, a familiar uneasiness beginning to settle in, as he looked around with a nervous, awestruck countenance.

"So...!" Miranda shouted over the loud music, towards Gordon, after noticing his agitated expression. "Are we getting over those pesky social phobias yet?"

With an ambivalent look in his eyes, Gordon responded by raising his hand, and held it out "rocking it back and forth like a scale briefly, as if to say "More or less." before he stopped, and simply

shook his head. "On second thought, not really..."

Miranda let out an unheard giggle, as she smiled warmly at him - squeezing his arm a little tighter, as she leaned closer to him.

"You guys wanna get a table with us...?!" Shepard shouted the question over the music, as he turned to Gordon and Miranda, after being briefly captivated himself.

"Sure, why not!" Miranda hollered in response.

The four began to weave through the streams of passengers coming and going - many happily staggering about with impaired motor skills, after already having had a few. While they made their way forward, through the crowd, the Commander lagged behind a bit, as he raised his right arm, and materialized his omni-tool to check the time...

6:08 P.M.

"Plenty of time." He assured himself with a confident grin, as he put his omni-tool away.

"Here's one." Miranda stated, as she spotted a table. It was one of the last few empty tables left on the main floor, with a clear view of both the stage, and the dance floor. A simple choice.

The two couples fanned out around the table, with Miranda and Gordon targeting the two chairs on the left, while John and Tali would take the two on the right.

"Oh..." Miranda uttered in a surprised, and flattered tone, as the Doctor pulled her chair out for her before she had a chance to reach for it. "My... I've never dated a gentleman before!" She proudly shouted over the music, across the table to Tali, as she took the seat.

"Me neither!" Tali replied jokingly, just as the Commander reached for her chair to do the same. "What's it like?!" She yelled, putting a bit of a feigned, phony scowl on his face, as he dragged her chair out for her.

"I'm just teasing you!" She assured him, softly caressing his face with her white, silken gloved hand, before sitting down. It put an uncharacteristically bashful look in his eyes, as he nodded and grinned happily.

As Gordon took his seat on the opposite side of the table, beside his newfound sweetheart in a scarlet dress, John took a brief glance up at the stage, and around the dance floor. Just then, he spotted another familiar face.

"Well, how 'bout that!" He shouted out with a smile, as he continued glancing out at the crowd for a moment longer, before turning back to the others. "Guess who else is here tonight!"

"Who?!" Tali questioned, as they raised their heads, and peered out into the sea of lifeforms, hoping to spot a glimpse of who he was talking about.

"Dr. Chakwas!" Shepard informed, as he turned and pointed out towards her position. "She's out on the far left side of the dance floor, dancing it up with some salarian!"

"Where? I don't...!" Tali began, as she stood up and sifted through the crowd with her eyes, before they finally spotted the obscured Doctor. "...Oh yeah, I see here now!"

The Normandy's silver haired medical officer swayed back and forth carelessly, along side a dark gray skinned salarian, in an expensive white suit. She had her hair tied back into a short pony tail, fastened with a silver clip, and she wore a modest, yet elegant black and white evening gown. She had no idea she had been spotted by amicable eyes, as she moved around so joyfully, and carefree. Whether it was lounging by the pool, going for a swim, having a drink, eating a good meal, or enjoying a show â€" this cruise seemed to be exactly what the crew needed after such a rigorous, hard fought battle. One might say it was... just what the Doctor ordered.

"I wonder who that is, that she's with...!" Tali postulated, as she and the others turned back around, and took their seats.

"Maybe she bagged herself a rich one!" Miranda replied, jokingly.

"Maybe...!" Shepard concurred with a grin.

* * *

><p>The stars streaked by outside the forward windows of a small, bulky, rudimentary built C-24 Tregen Class cargo freighter - a plain, silver colored ship, jaded and aged, about one third the size of the Normandy, with a spacious cargo bay. It was a ship built for transport, functionality, and little else, lacking a sleek look, or elegant design.<p>

An armored asari sat with her hands over the illuminated, holographic controls, piloting the ship, as a turian sat in the seat beside her, possibly serving as her co-pilot. And a towering, bitter faced krogan stood behind them, near the doorway of the small, cramped cockpit.

The krogan stood leaning against the back corner, with his arms crossed. He had pale green skin, and a bright, lime green colored osteoderm plate sheltering the top of his head. The turian had dark brown skin, with red markings around his eyes, and jagged, white stripes encompassing his mouth, like the pointed teeth of a jack-o-lantern. Each of them wore the same maroon colored, battle scarred set of armor, marked with a white crest over each shoulder â€" an angry, white skull, with the teeth and jawline composed of a tightly clenched fist.

As the ship hurdled through space, at speeds faster than light, the door to the cockpit suddenly slid open, and in waddled the grand orchestrator.

"I trust we are on schedule...?" The stout, pudgy little creature, in a full, brown body suit queried, under the sound of a heavy respirator breath.

"We're fine..." The asari at the controls stringently asserted.

"We had better be, Thessia clan..." The arrogant volus admonished. "We'll only have a twenty minute window to catch the ship, once it disengages FTL speeds for the Drezaraan Sunrise. If we miss that window, this entire operation will be lost."

"Look, you little imp!" The asari scalded angrily, as she turned her torso and neck around to glare at the volus. "I told you, we're on schedule! And if we miss your... 'window...!' Then take it up with your little quarian sap! He's the one that plotted this course..."

"Why you insolent...!" The volus breathed a loud, heavy gasp of disbelief. "...Don't forget who you're speaking to, Thessia clan! I'm the one that put this whole scheme together!"

"Hey!" The deep, angry voice of the krogan standing by suddenly reverberated loudly throughout the small room, as he crouched down to meet the volus at his level. Even in this hunkered down state, his sheer mass utterly dwarfed the volus.

"And don't YOU forget-" He began, as he shoved the volus back, with a hard finger to the chest. "-that we're supplying the mechs, and the muscle for your little scheme, Tarrik. So you'd better hope that everything goes according to plan. Because if it doesn't... It's your hide that I'll be taking it out of... You got that!?" The krogan demanded, before standing back upright.

"...Of-Of course." Tarrik assured with a heavy respirator breath, doing his best to sound calm and composed, despite the heavy hint of intimidation in his voice. "There's no need to get dramatic, Kargas. You'll be well compensated, after all. And my plan is foolproof. As long as we reach that ship on time, we can't fail..."

"Good." Kargas brashly assured, as he leaned back against the wall. "Then you've got nothing to worry about. And stop harassing my team. We know what we're doing."

"Right..." The impudent little volus continued, nervously fidgeting with his hands, as he turned back towards the door. "I'll leave you to it then..." He declared as he walked out.

"Hehe. Imp..." The turian sitting beside the asari uttered with a chuckle, as the steel door slid shut behind the brown suited volus.

"Mercenaries..." Tarrik grumbled angrily, as he walked down the short corridor, leading towards the ship's cargo bay. "Why did I have to go and hire mercenaries..."

The cargo bay was indeed quite spacious, but fairly nondescript. Plain, rust speckled, steel walls encompassed the entirety of the room, with their most attractive feature being the large port and starboard observation windows. Two large, yellow painted rails ran parallel along the cargo bay's ceiling, with a traveling bridge spanning the gap, supporting an overhead crane, from which a pincer-like clamp hung suspended at the end.

Like a giant claw crane game, the clamp hung idly above a large agglomeration of white, LOKI class mechs, as if it could spring to life at any moment, and fish for one of the inert metal men as a prize. Rows and rows of them, they stood lined up side by side in the muddled room, holding sub-machine guns across their chests, like a platoon of soldiers ready for deployment.

And like a General at the head of his mechanized squadron, one mech stood out front and center, before all the rest. A large, hulking creation " the YMIR Class Heavy Assault Mech... A metal behemoth nearly twice the girth of an adult krogan, with an equally intimidating arsenal. Beneath two protective metal chassis', carried where an organic would possess hands, it was armed with twin high capacity mass accelerator assault canons mounted onto its right arm, and a high explosive rocket propelled grenade launcher onto its left.

In contrast to the slender LOKI mechs however, this one was obviously not ready for deployment. It stood lifelessly, with a large panel door hanging open, exposing its chest cavity, as a quarian in a burgundy colored enviro-suit scanned its innards with his glowing omni-tool. A number of cables spilled out of the mech's chest, wired to a small, portable terminal sitting on a large metal crate besides the quarian, as he would intermittently switch to it to input a plethora of data and commands.

"Leahr'Haan!" The abrasive volus exclaimed, as he approached, causing the quarian to stop, and turn around at the sound of his name.

"Are they finished?"

"Well, the LOKIs are..." The veiled machinist informed, in a tone heavy with fatigue and a tinge of disdain. "But I've still got a lot of work to do on the YMIR. It'll be another few hours before I can get it operational..."

The hiss of the volus' breath came before his reply. "You've still got a little more than two hours before we reach the Illustria..." Tarrik confidently assured with a dismissing wave of his hand. "Plenty of time."

"No!" Leahr'Haan refuted angrily. "No, not plenty of time, Tarrik! That won't be enough! I told you that this couldn't be done in the time frame you gave me..." He shook his head frustratedly, as he placed one hand over his forehead area, and the other on his hip, and began to pace around in a small circle.

"Calm Down." Tarrik demanded, with a pronounced breath. "Don't get yourself worked up. What's wrong with it? What do you still need to do?"

"Uh..." Leahr replied with a nervous sigh, as he stopped and looked up at the massive mech. "Well, the mech itself is working. But I'm still trying to configure its guidance systems... It'll be at least another three hours before I can get the new navigational parameters uploaded. Without those, it won't be able to maneuver around the ship. It'll just bumble around and walk into walls... As is, it's not much good for anything... Except maybe standing guard at a stationary post."

"So make it stand guard." Tarrik instructed, with a casual shrug of his shoulders. "Have it protect the ship once we dock with the Illustria. Just in case any stray passengers find their way in here, thinking they can find shelter, or a means of escape..." He said with an odious, almost gleefully sinister tone, causing the quarian to look away from his employer in shame – a cold shiver running down his back.

"Besides." Tarrik continued. "I doubt we'll be needing it. I'm sure Kargas' team, and Kim's men will be more than adequate to handle this job." He took a few tottering steps forward towards the mech, tilting his head far back to gaze upon the hulking metal man. However much one of these heavy assault mechs may have towered over the other races of the galaxy, it was that much more impressive from the diminutive perspective of a volus. "And a YMIR really is overkill, after all..."

"Alright, well-" Leahr'Haan began again, exhaling a sigh and hanging his head, as he did his best to swallow back the guilt which was choking his conscience. "-if you're not gonna need this one, then yes... The rest are finished."

"Good." The reassured Tarrik affirmed, as he turned back to face Leahr. "And what about the jamming device you installed. You're positive it'll work...?"

Before answering, the quarian turned away, and took a few slow steps towards a nearby metal crate, dragging his feet in defeat, before he turned, and had a seat on it, with a world of apprehensions weighing on his mind.

"Yes..." Leahr acknowledged in a low, lamented tone. "It'll work. Once activated, all communications within a thirty kilometer radius will be completely disrupted. All except for the unique encrypted frequency I specified..." The moment he finished, he hung his head down, burying his chin into his chest, and clasped his tri-fingered hands together, twiddling his thumbs.

"Excellent." The pleased volus claimed. "You do good work, my boy!" He assured in a tone mired in sarcasm, and obscured by a heavy breath, as he turned and began to waddle away. "Keep it up!"

"Tarrik!" Leahr unexpectedly shouted out angrily, garnering Tarrik's attention, stopping him cold in his tracks, and forcing him to turn back around.

"I don't like this, Tarrik..." He asserted, firmly shaking his head, as he locked eyes with the volus. "This isn't what we agreed to. You said you'd be using non-lethal ordnance. You never said anything about killing people..."

"And I won't!" The pudgy little ringleader assured, with a happy shrug of his shoulders, and a fraudulent sympathy. "Believe me Leahr, the last thing I wanna do is kill anyone."

As the disingenuous volus played at appeasing him, Leahr'Haan turned his head, and looked over the rows of mechs lined up in the room – each clutching a deadly sub-machine gun in their grasps.

"All this is just for a little added intimidation, to keep everyone in line, that's all. As long as everyone listens, and does exactly what they're told... No one has to die."

Leahr turned and glared a hard, narrow eyed look through the volus.
"And if they don't...?"

"Well..." Tarrik replied, in a voice lacking even the slightest shred of compassion, as he turned around and headed out. "Then at least they won't live long enough to wish they had..."

* * *

><p>The bright stage lights flashed on the band of asari, as the crowd danced feverishly to the hit music. And those that knew the words to the popular song, sang along to the refrain, with the performing vocalist.<p>

Gordon grinned and shook his head in disbelief at what he was hearing. With his arm around Miranda, as she leaned up against him in her seat, he couldn't help but bob his head to the rhythm of the music, from his place at the table. The lyrics may have been a little different, but the song was definitely familiar.

"_We didn't make the Relays!" _

"_They were always spinning, way since the beginning!" _

"_We didn't make the Relays!"_

"_Though we didn't make 'em, we were quick to take 'em!" _

"_Omni tools! Drive Cores! Krogans and the Rachni Wars!"_

"_Elcor Hamlet. Skyllian Blitz. Eezo Biotics." _

"_Morning War! Quarrians sail! Geth hide behind the Veil!"_

"_The Genophage. The Krogans Rage. Spectre psychotics."

—

—...—

"_First Contact! Shanxi Battle! Turians! All get rattled!"

—

"_Humans! They worked out well! Now they're on the Citadel!"

—

"_Batarians! Elcor! Protheans are no more!" _

"_Victor Manswell! Edan Had'dah! Terra Firma! Oh Well!"_

"_We didn't make the Relays!" _

"_They were always spinning, way since the beginning!" _

"_We didn't make the Relays!"_

"_Though we didn't make 'em, we were quick to take 'em!" _

Tali danced back and forth, practically in Shepard's lap, as she leaned back against him, turned sideways in her seat - using him as her own personal cushion, while she looked out towards the stage. The sights, the sounds, the music... She loved it all!

"Hey Gordon!" The Commander looked across the table, and called out loudly. "The original version of this song is from around your era, isn't it?!"

"What?!" Gordon beckoned, furrowing his brow, as he cupped his right hand around his ear and turned it towards Shepard.

"I said the original version of this song is from around your era, right?!"

"Yeah, more or less!" Gordon acknowledged with a worry-free grin. "Billy Joel translates over rather well!"

"Yeah!" Shepard affirmed with a laugh. "Better than Gilbert and Sullivan, I'll tell ya that!"

Gordon chuckled in response, though not entirely sure what he was referring to, as John turned back to face the stage - wrapping his arms around Tali's waist. Just then, Gordon noticed a turian stealthily trying to sneak through the crowd towards them in a bit of a hunkered down state. As he quickly approached from Shepard and Tali's side of the table, he noticed that he had already been spotted by the vigilant Freeman.

"Shh..." He motioned by placing a sharp pointed finger vertically over his mouth, with a sinister gleam in his eyes.

Slowly, he crept up behind Shepard, raising his arms up in a menacing fashion for a dastardly deed - possibly to put the Commander into a roughhouse headlock.

"Hello Garrus!" John shouted without actually turning around to face him.

Garrus froze in shock after being discovered, without the Commander taking so much as a glance in his direction.

"H... H-How the hell did you know...?!" Garrus beseeched, as he let his shoulders slouch, and his arms drop to his sides in defeat.

Shepard turned to look up at the scarred turian, giving him a cocky smile. "Spotted you when you walked in a while ago."

Garrus simply stood there, shaking his head, conceding victory with a stunned look on his face and a disappointed grin.

"Hey, Garrus!" Tali greeted loudly, as he walked around the table to the front. "Well, you look nice!"

The battle hardened turian, with a scar on his face, and blue stripes under his eyes was dressed in a fine white dinner suit, boldly accented with deep blue stripes, running down the front, and around the boney brim surrounding his shoulders. An elegant change from his

usual blue armor, but that's what this cruise was all about after all.

"Heya, Tali... Thanks!" Garrus genially reciprocated, as he looked around the table and bestowed his greetings. "Miranda...! Freeman...!" He said, carrying his voice over the fading music, and cordially nodding at each of them. "You're all looking classy tonight!"

"Hello Garrus." Miranda returned with a slight nod.

"Hey Garrus." Gordon concurred cheerfully.

"_Though we didn't make 'em, we were quick to take 'em...! Yeah!"

—

The room erupted into an excited frenzy of wild applause, sharp whistles, and feverish cheers as the song came to a close.

"Thank you!" The lead vocalist of the asari band bestowed into the mic, as the crowd continued their ovation. "Thank you so much! We love you!"

"So how's it goin', Garrus?" Shepard queried, as the cheers and applause began to abate.

"Oh, terrific...!" Garrus exclaimed heartily, as a salarian announcer took the stage. "It's been years since I felt this good. And I just figured I'd pop in here... work the room a little, see what all the fuss was about."

"The Vy'Zaira Venue ladies and gentlemen!" The salarian at the stage announced, ushering a reverent ovation from the crowd, as the band made their way down. "Give 'em another round of applause!"

"And this IS one hell of a nice place..." Garrus assured, giving the room a quick look around, as the ovation intensified once more.

"So how 'bout once around the dance floor, Tali?" He asked, spinning his finger around, as he turned back towards the lavishly dressed quarian, nestled up against the tux clad Commander. "You don't really like to dance, right Shepard? You don't mind, do you?"

Before either John or Tali could accept or deny, the announcers voice echoed loudly throughout the room once more, as the lights suddenly dimmed even further, leaving it shrouded in darkness.

"And now ladies and gentlemen... We have a special treat for you." A spotlight pierced the darkness, splashing onto the stage, as a slow, smooth, entrancing melody began to fill the room. "We're gonna slow things down now for all you lovers out there...!"

"Allow me to present the drell that put romance in your eyes, and taught the galaxy how to love again... Lethelio Therynd!" The words incited a hugely fevered response from the crowd - especially from the ladies who showed their adoration with shrieks of excitement, as a light skinned drell, in a silky black ensemble, suavely stepped into the spotlight.

"Sorry Garrus!" Shepard contritely denied, as he stood up from his

seat, while holding on to Tali's hand, in the dark. "But this is a special occasion..." He declared, softly gazing down into her luminous eyes, which shined back up at him from behind her mask, as a reverberant, silvery voice began to sing of a warm embrace, and a gentle caress. "And tonight, all her dances belong to me... Come on, bright eyes..."

He didn't need to ask twice. Her heart melted for him right then and there. She gently placed her silk wrapped hand into his, and stood up from her chair. With one hand stoically placed behind his back, like a gentleman of olde, he courtly led her out, and the two disappeared into the slow dancing sea of life.

"Hmhmhmhm..." Garrus chuckled under his breath, as he stood by with his arms akimbo on his hips. He turned back towards Miranda and Gordon, as the soothing, poetic rhythm flowed throughout the room.

"Well how 'bout you, Freeman?" He questioned loudly, with a sly grin on his face. "Come on, aren't you gonna get out there? Show Miranda a few of your moves?"

"Uh-hehe... Uh, yeah... Maybe..." Gordon stuttered a bit, as he let out a bit of a bashful, nervous laugh, and gave an awkward shrug of his shoulders.

"Well, I'm probably gonna head down to the Promenade Deck, myself..." Garrus declared, pointing a thumb over his shoulder, towards the exit. "Hit the casino... I think that's where most of the others are gonna be tonight. Heh, you know I heard Joker was going to try and use Legion to cheat for him." He informed with a cheerful snicker.

"Why does that not surprise me...?" Miranda asked, rolling her eyes and shaking her head with a cheerful sarcasm. "If you see him, tell him he'd better watch himself. I don't think Shepard'd be too happy if he has to bail him out of the brig..."

"Yeah, I'll tell 'em." Garrus affirmed with a laugh. "Well, I'll catch you two later. Take care." He said, as he turned, and began to walk away, before he turned back around, and pointed a finger towards Gordon. "And you behave yourself, egghead!"

"Hmph, see ya later, Garrus!" Gordon shouted back with a cheerful snicker, as Garrus' silhouette faded into the darkness mired club.

As the emotional melody continued to fill the room, Gordon unexpectedly slid his chair out, and slowly stood up. Miranda turned to look up at him, wondering what he was doing, as his arm was withdrawn from around her. He stood up straight, and briefly tugged down at his tux jacket, straightening it out.

"Uh, ahem..." He began, first clearing his throat. "W-Would you... care to dance...?"

"You dance...?!" Miranda questioned in wide eyed disbelief.

"Well..." Gordon replied, tilting his head a bit, and taking a

somewhat cocky undertone. "I was known for a step or two, in my day... Besides, didn't I tell you? My PhD was actually in Danceology..."

As soon as it came out, he couldn't help himself from cringing a little, with a look of embarrassment on his face.

"...That was bad, wasn't it?" He admitted, realizing how poorly his failed attempt at a joke must've sounded. Miranda gave him a sweet smile, but it was accompanied by a pity filled look in her eyes, as she gently nodded her head, in agreement.

"Sounded a lot better in my head..." He said with a shrug. "Well, at least you know it wasn't in comedy."

"Hmhmhmhmh..." She couldn't help herself from giggling joyfully under her breath, at his follow up.

"Hey, whaddaya know, I made it work after all!" He stated with a triumphant enthusiasm, as he extended his hand towards her.

Miranda laid her soft hand upon his, and he gently caressed its back with his thumb, as she stood up. Never once did either of them look away from the gaze they shared into the depths of the other's eyes, as they slowly weaved their way onto the dance floor, hand in hand.

Up on the stage, a drell continued to sing... Songs of love, and longing. Songs of never wanting to be apart, and the passages, to the deepest recesses, and furthest reaches, of a woman's heart...

"_My Love..."_

"_Tonight, You're in my dreams..."_

"_And all the worlds, it seems..."_

"_are playing our favorite song..."_

"_My love...!"_

"_I feel your warmth tonight..."_

"_And all the stars shine bright..."_

"_We're right where we belong..."_

The indigo glow from his luminescent visor, that softly caressed her soft, porcelain skin, seemed to also bejewel her eyes in the darkness. She held her physicist tightly, as if never wanting to let go. And as they glided around the room, cradled closely in eachother's arms "€" perhaps the only reading his visor was incapable of taking, was that she never did...

"_To take..."_

"_Your love away from me..."_

"_Means I could never breath..." _

"_Or see the light of day..." _

"_Your kiss..."_

"_Makes all the darkness wane..."_

"_Brings comfort to my pain..."_

"_And show's me there's a way..." _

"_To hold you close tonight..."_

Her glittering eyes shined up at him, from behind her mask, as she draped her arm tightly around his broad shoulders. He held her closely... Delicately... A tender touch, as they floated across the dance floor. Here they were... A hardened soldier, gracefully dancing with his belle of the ball – this quarian with flowers in her veil... And as they danced on into the evening hours, never could things seem more perfect...

6. Chapter 6: A Schedule to Keep Part II

****Salvation: Episode I – The Taking of the Carmenta
Illustria****

Disclaimer: This fan-fiction is part of an episodic series taking place after Salvation: A Half-Life/Mass Effect Universe Fan Fiction, which will lead directly to its sequel, Salvation II: Project Prometheus. These episodes and sequel take place OUTSIDE of the Mass Effect 3 continuity. Characters property of their respective companies, Half-Life created by Valve and Mass Effect created by Bioware.

****Chapter 6: A Schedule to Keep (Part II)****

****A Night to Remember...****

We're spending all our money tonight! The air seems scented with perfume. You know the party's just beginnin', when lady luck walks into the room...! Ah yes, the Promenade Deck – known by most as the Casino deck. And known by others still, as the heart breaker, fortune taker, or money maker deck, depending on how favorably lady luck looks upon you.

As far as the eye could see, snappy dressed patrons surrounded craps, blackjack, and roulette tables, playing victim or victor to the house dealer. They made friends with the Quasar machines, and shook hands with the slots. Glass pane windows surrounded the exquisitely decorated deck. And behind those windows, exotically skilled asari dancers enticed and beguiled with their luscious, passionate movements.

There seemed to be a vibrant, orange glow about the room. Amidst the tempest of smoke, casino lights, and holograms; the flicker of torchlight blazed over the crowds, as burning braziers lit high atop towering, tribal carved columns burned brightly. Perhaps to give the room an almost primal ambiance. Drums pounded, a jazzy tune played in the distance, waiters breezed by pushing carts of hors d'oeuvres, and the champagne flowed like golden nectar of the gods, as fortunes were

won and lost. Yes, for many the luck may run out, and the pickings may be slim, but there was an excitement fueled rush in this room, tonight!

"Okay, Legion..." Joker began to explain, as he strolled through the casino, side by side with the metal mobile platform, with his arm drawn around his back in a friendly manner. He wore a casual red shirt, his usual black and white SR-2 cap, and a pair of loose fitting, black denim pants.. He also still wore the metallic brace around his neck, but his free range of movements seemed to indicate that his injuries were healing quite well. "So then you're familiar with the game of Blackjack, right? You know what to do?"

"Blackjack..." Legion replied in the usual metallic, reverberating voice. "Occasionally referred to colloquially as 21. A casino banking game, originally created by humans, played with one or more decks of fifty-two cards, between a player, or players, and a dealer. The player or players are initially dealt a two card h..."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah! I know...!" Joker abruptly interjected, cutting the dictating Legion off, before he could finish what would have otherwise been a lengthy lesson. "I don't need a rehash of the rules, alright. I just need you to do whatever it is you do... to win it big for me!" He said with a devious enthusiasm, and a slick, conniving grin, as the two approached a crescent shaped table.

The salarian dealer, in a formal blue uniform, grew nervous almost immediately, when he suddenly noticed the bright headlight of Legion's face approaching the table, after dealing a hand to an elcor and turian player.

"New player! Comin' in!" Joker shouted, nudging Legion along, as they stepped into the table's light.

"Uh..." The salarian dealer uttered in concerned befuddlement.

"What's the matter? Never seen a geth play Blackjack before?"

"Uhm... Well... No, actually..." The dismally confused salarian stuttered.. "Uh-I-I'm not sure this is legal. I should probably consult the floor manager..."

"What are you talkin' about? Of course it's legal!" Joker blatantly asserted, as he pushed Legion around towards the front of the stool, and sat him down. "Haven't you been watching the news? That new treaty says that the geth get all the same rights as anyone else in the galaxy. You don't wanna start an intergalactic incident, do you?"

"Well... No. Of course not..."

"I didn't think so!" Joker happily exclaimed, with a hint of condescendence in his voice. "Put 'em in for three hundred creds!" He announced, as he looked down at Legion - giving him a reassuring nod, and swiping his omni-tool over the holo-panel in front of him, before taking a step back.

As Joker backed off, practically licking his lips, and rubbing his hands together, three small towers of holographic chips appeared before him, ready to wager.

"New player! Comin' in for three-hundred...!" The salarian dealer reluctantly announced, as he drew the first set of cards from the shoe.

At a nearby table, a pair of jade dice bounced by, as they rolled across the craps table board. They slammed against the inner wall, and tumbled to a slow stop.

"Seven!" The stickman announced as the crowd surrounding the table erupted into a frenzy of cheers.

"Alright! Place your bets!" He called out, scooping up the dice, and sliding them back towards the shooter, as the cheering dwindled.

The players all slid their omni-tools over the panels on the edge of the table, causing their holo-chips to materialize across the board, in their respective spots.

The shooter, a slender salarian scientist, in a casual gray outfit, took his place at the head of the table, as he scooped up the dice. He clutched them tightly in his fists, as a serious look overtook his expression. He narrowed his eyes, concentrating on the table, as he began to twirl the dice around in his palm like stress balls. Suddenly, with a precision toss, he let them fly! Again, they tumbled across the table, as the wide eyed gamblers watched their every bounce, in captivated silence. One slowly rolled to a stop, exhibiting four face up pips. The crowd took a collective gasp, as the second die teetered on its edge. Just then, it fell flat... Three pips up.

"Seven!" The stickman announced once more, as the crowd went into a ravenous frenzy again.

While Mordin scooped up the dice for another throw, with a subtle grin on his face, over the accumulating chips in front of him – a melancholy krogan followed a mildly irate human through the casino, behind him.

"Look, would you stop moping!" Jacob begged angrily, as Grunt tagged along. "And if you're not gonna stop moping, then at least mope somewhere else..." He demanded, as he stopped and turn to face the massive krogan.

Jacob was suavely dressed in a stylish, tan colored, collar suit - keeping one hand strategically sunk in his pocket, while his other hung freely at his side, swinging with each swaggering step. Grunt's mode of dress was a fair bit more casual. A simple gray outfit, fitted for a krogan, and accented in blue – namely around his shoulders, and across the broad hump on his back.

"There's nothing to kill on this ship..." Jacob asserted. "There aren't going to be any battles here, okay...? It's a cruise for god's sake. Relax... Enjoy yourself!"

"Mmph... I am... trying..." Grunt acknowledged, with a frustrated groan under his breath, and a scowl on his face that he tried to

force into a smile. "It's why I'm here... But I find myself restless... And this place... I've never seen anything like this before..." He said, as he slowly spun around, looking at the bustling hive, and the flashing lights. "The tank mother never taught me of places like this..."

"Really...?" Jacob queried, furrowing his brow in disbelief. His expression suddenly softened, as a look of compassion began to shine through. "Well... I suppose I can let you tag along for a while. Show you the ropes..." He said, as he turned back around, and the two continued forward.

"This, my dear krogan, is called a casino..." Jacob declared, as he raised his hands out before him as if making a grand announcement. Grunt continued to look around as he was introduced to a whole other world. The bright lights, the rhythmic sounds, the dancing flames, the sensual performing asari in the windows, and the aroma of expensive cigars and perfume in the air... It wasn't exactly Tuchanka.

"Yep... This is what we call the spoils of war." Jacob informed, cracking a slick grin, as they weaved through the game tables, and gambling crowds. "We won the war..." He said, just as a curvacious brunette, wearing a short cut skirt, strolled by and enticed his eye. "Mmm-mmm-mmm... And now, we go after the spoils..."

Joker bit down on his lower lip, scrunching his cap up in his hands, as if he were ringing a wet towel, while he watched Legion play.

Legion looked up at the dealer, from the two cards lying face up before him "the Jack of Spades, and the Eight of Hearts. "We request a hit." His metallic voice declared, ushering the dealer to draw a new card, and place it before Legion, as Joker held his breath.

The Six of Clubs...

"Twenty-four. Bust!" The dealer called out.

"G-H-What?!" Joker demanded angrily, with a bit of a choked up mutter, as he rushed up to the table behind Legion. "That's three in a row you've lost!"

"Excuse us just one moment..." He said to the dealer with a polite sarcasm, matching the irate smile on his face, as he nudged Legion off the stool.

"What's going on?!" Joker demanded, as they walked a short distance away. "You haven't won a single hand!"

"We do not understand your disapproval..." Legion explained, as he observed Joker's agitated condition. "You requested that this unit engage in the banking game known as Blackjack, and we have complied..."

"Don't understand my dis...?!" Joker cringed his eyes tightly. He wasn't even able to finish his sentence, as he frustratedly placed his wrinkled cap back onto his head, and yanked the sides down over his ears, tightly. "You're supposed to WIN!" He asserted, glaring at

Legion, and shaking his hands angrily at him. "Ca-Can't you... count the cards, or... calculate the probability or something?!"

"Yes." Legion acknowledged, nonchalantly. "We can determine the probability of a winning hand, with a success rate of 93.47%"

Joker's jaw suddenly dropped, and his eyes flared up, as he starred at Legion with a speechless bewilderment. He threw his hands out in front of him, palms up, as if begging, while making some sort of choked up, gasping, breathing sounds. "B... W... Uh... Y-You... THEN WHY DIDN'T YOU?!" He erupted. "I'm out almost a thousand credits because of you!"

"To do so would defeat the purpose of the game..."

"Aurgh..." Joker released a hefty, drawn out groan, as he placed his hands over his face, and dragged his palms downward, stretching his cheeks down with his fingertips. He looked up at the ceiling for a moment, with a lost look on his face, as Legion innocently observed. "Figures... Of all the geth I coulda gotten, I get stuck with the one that has a conscience..."

"Hey, leave the law abiding machine alone!"

Joker and Legion both turned around, as they heard an approaching familiar voice.

"Garrus..." Joker uttered, with a pouty look in his eyes, as the familiar turian walked up to them, sporting a big grin. "Yeah sure, take his side..."

"You know, you're lucky Legion here doesn't cheat." He affirmed with a laugh, as he patted Legion's hard, metal back. "Miranda told me to tell you to watch yourself... You get caught doing something you ain't supposed to be doing, you're liable to get yourself thrown in the brig..."

"Pfft..." Joker scoffed. "EDI woulda done it for me. And we wouldn't get caught either..."

"Wait..." He continued, as he looked up at Garrus, raising a concerned eyebrow. "You're technically not a cop anymore, right...?"

* * *

><p>The uniformed Security Commander brought his arm up, materializing his omni-tool over his forearm, as he walked down a long maintenance stairwell.<p>

7:56 P.M.

A bright holographic display exhibited the time, as he made his way down " every step of his hard soled boots clanged loudly against the plain, steel grate steps, and echoed throughout the stairwell. He quickly put his omni-tool away, as he reached the bottom, with no further stairs leading down, and only a single, steel door before him, which slid open as he approached it.

He came into a vast, hangar sized room. In it were a multitude of large, round vehicles, resembling some sort of small submarines.

Many of the Lycuna Brochures often read: "Discover the majesty of undersea worlds, in one of our submersible aqua-pods!" To assume that that's what these strange conveyances were, would probably be a safe guess, as the room was also filled with other recreational tools, and toys, such as small boats, jet skis, diving equipment, surfboards, and more. For those fun occasions when the ship would dock in the various select luxury cruise destinations.

Ignoring all this recreational hoopla, the fog eyed Commander Kim proceeded forth, turning the immediate corner towards the back of the large loading bay. He quickly spotted a young turian at the far back wall, standing guard beside the large hangar door, with a perfect view of nearly the entire loading bay.

The turian had medium light skin, and twin dark blue stripes marking the areas around his eyes. He wore an equipment belt around his waist, and a plain blue security uniform, not nearly as distinctive as his approaching Commander's. When he saw his human superior approaching, he held his breath for a moment, as he swiftly stood himself up straight; chest out, gut in, head up, with his arms stoically locked behind his back. It definitely rattled his nerves a bit to see Commander Kim all the way down here, in the bowels of the ship. Especially with the notorious, almost menacing reputation he'd acquired.

"At ease rookie..." Commander Kim urged, with a scoffing laugh, as he approached the nervous turian, taking note of the way he snapped to attention in his presence. "This isn't an inspection."

"Yes sir..." The turian acknowledged, however doing little more to relax than letting his shoulders slouch down a little. "Is there something I can do for you, sir?" He questioned with a profound sense of respect for authority.

"...Nope." Kim declared, as he took a brief look around the hangar sized room. "I'm just doing my rounds, that's all." He said, as he turned back to face the turian.

In turn, the turian nodded his head once, as he kept to his post. He nervously seemed to try to avoid eye contact with his Commander, though not doing it so blatantly that he'd notice.

"So you're the poor guy that got stuck with loading bay duty, eh?" Kim questioned cheerfully, as he placed his hands on his hips.

"Yes sir... I suppose so."

"Heh, yeah it's always the new guy." The Commander said with grin, and a shake of his head. "What was your name again...?" He asked, as he squinted his good eye, and tried to make out the engraved nameplate on his uniform. "Zeh-Zehdrah..."

"Zdrawkoh, sir..." The turian modestly offered, turning his gaze down towards the fog eyed human. "Zdrawkoh Y'kupets..."

"Ah. Interesting name..." Kim declared, shrugging his shoulders with

a hint of irony in his voice. "Is it a... common name among turians?"

"...Yes sir." Zdrawkoh informed with a bit of uncertainty, although feeling a bit more comfortable with the conversation. "Well, Zdrawkoh is, as far as I know... It can be a bit difficult for other species to pronounce though. Most humans I meet tend to just call me Zee..."

"Zee." Kim reiterated, nodding his head with a grin. "Yeah, I like that. I think we'll stick to Zee. If... you don't mind, that is...?"

"No sir. Not at all."

"Ah, good." The Commanding officer assured, clasping his hands together decisively. "Zee it is then! Well, Zee..." He continued, taking a more serious tone. "I think the first thing you should know is, I like to know my men... I've hand picked nearly every single member of the security force on-board the *Illustria*... Some have been with me for years. The only reason that wasn't the case with you-" He continued, taking on a slightly sarcastic tone. "-is because the Lycuna Cruise Commission, in all their infinite wisdom... decided to assign you here, last minute..."

Zee's head contritely sunk between his shoulders, as he worried about initial disapproval from his Commander.

"Anyway..." Kim continued, breathing a long drawn out sigh, as he looked around at the bland, nondescript walls and ceiling of the large loading bay. "How'd you manage to land this glamorous job...?"

"I uhm... Well, I-I applied, sir..." Zee responded with a nervous stutter. "I was interviewed a few weeks ago. They said welcome aboard, and they assigned me here..."

Kim nodded as he listened, starrng blankly to one side, with a listless expression on his face.

"Ahem..." Zee continued, clearing his throat first, trying to shake off his apprehensions. "Uhm, I... Well, I-I'm hoping to get accepted into the C-Sec Academy soon. And your chances are better if you've had experience in security or law enforcement."

"Ah, future C-Sec investigator, eh...?" Kim declared reassuringly, as he slipped his hand into his right pant pocket, and pulled out a thin, metallic case, about the size of a wallet.

"I'm hoping, sir." The turian said, as he watched Commander Kim split open the case, pull out a cigarette, and slide it between his lips.

"Care for a smoke?" The fog eyed Kim offered in slightly muddled voice, extending the case towards the turian, with a cigarette pinched between his lips.

"N... No thank you, sir..." Zee refused, with a bit of a gulp. "But uhm..." He stopped, and turned to look at a red sign on the nearby wall, which read in bold red letters: NO SMOKING.

"Oh..." Kim acknowledged, as he noticed the sign, quickly pulling the unlit cigarette out of lips, and placing it back into his silver cigarette case. "Of course, what am I doing?"

"Good call, rookie." He assured with a cheerful demeanor and a crooked grin, although his glare seemed to reflect something a bit darker, as he clamped the case shut hard, and slowly slid it back into his pocket. "You'll be working at C-Sec in no time."

* * *

><p>"Lethelio Theryndl, ladies and gentlemen! Give it up!" The salarian in the spotlight announced, as the suave drell performer bowed, and blew kisses to the cheering crowd.<p>

The Doctor, the Commander, the quarian, and the operative all stood within the crowd, clapping their hands together as the music came to an end.

As the ovation began to dissipate, Shepard brought his arm up, materializing his omni-tool.

8:16 P.M.

Shepard's eyes widened in surprise, after he realized how quickly the time had flown by. He swiftly put his omni-tool away, and turned to Tali.

"It's almost 8:20." He said to her, as a DJ took the stage. "We should go ahead and head out."

"Aww, but I've had so much fun dancing with you...!" Tali stated, feigning sadness in a cutesy voice, as she swayed up against him.

"Well..." He replied, playfully rolling his eyes towards the ceiling, as a fast beat began to play, and some of the patron dispersed from the dance floor, while others came in. "If you're not interested in my surprise..."

"Okay, let's go!" She immediately interjected, causing them both to laugh together, as they turned and headed towards the exit.

As they made their way through the dancing crowd, they crossed paths with Gordon and Miranda who seemed to be weaving their way in the opposite direction.

"Hey...! We'll see you two later!" Shepard shouted over the music, as the two couples met. "We've got plans elsewhere, tonight!"

"Okay!" Miranda acknowledged loudly. "We'll see you later then!"

"Take care!" Gordon added.

Just then, before either couple could walk away, the Commander noticed someone walk in through the club's grand doors. A blonde haired, slender figured heap of aggravation, in a sky blue dress.

"I'd try and disappear if I were you...!" He said to Gordon and Miranda, with raised eyebrows, and a shake of his head, as he motioned towards the exit. "Trouble just walked in...!"

"Oh great, her again..." Miranda said to herself, barely heard by the others over the music. "Alright! We'll see you later!" She shouted to Tali and Shepard. The two couples dismissed themselves with friendly nods, and broke off in opposite directions.

"Let's have a drink at the bar!" Miranda suggested loudly, as they cut through the dancing crowd, attempting to get off the dance floor.

"Sure!" Gordon concurred, with a shrug of his shoulders and a nod.

She smiled, as she took his arm in her hands. She made sure it was the right one she was taking, and not his left, which still encased his forearm in a metallic cast beneath his tuxedo sleeve, and was probably still sore. She raised his arm up, and nestled closely to him, as she drew it around herself, wrapping herself in it, as if she was putting on a scarf. Gordon grinned warmly, and held her close. A happy, peaceful feeling washed over him, as the two made their way towards the bar in the back.

"Commander Shepard!" The ambitious young reporter called out when she noticed the tux clad Commander, and the elegant lavender dress wearing quarian breeze by, with their heads down and turned away, in a failed attempt at not getting noticed.

"Oh boshtet..."

"Damn...!" Shepard concurred with Tali, giving a firm shake of his head. "I was REALLY hoping she wouldn't notice us." The two simply continued along, towards the exit, completely unhindered.

"Commander Shepard, sir!" Cameron called out eagerly, as she jogged up behind them. "Commander, just a moment of your time, please!"

"Nope!" Shepard asserted, as they reached the door, and continued on, without signs of slowing.

"Commander please, it'll only take a moment!"

"Go away..." Tali demanded, in a voice quickly brewing with vexation, as they walked out, from the dim lit club into the brightly illuminated hall outside. Immediately upon exiting, the two descended the small staircase, and turned towards a nearby elevator, with the nagging reporter in tow.

"Sir, please... If I could just get a few minutes of your time..." She pleaded, as Shepard reached out and pushed the elevator button, completely unfazed by the woman's incessant badgering. "I-It doesn't even have to be now... If you'd just agree to do an interview later, I'd be more than happy to..."

DING!

The elevator's bell chimed, as the door slid open. Tali stepped in, as the Commander followed closely behind her, and the reporter followed closely behind him. Or at least, she tried... As soon as Shepard stepped on, he immediately turned around, and blocked the path with his arm across the opening.

"Ah-ah... Sorry, this one's full." He said with a sarcastic snicker, and a devious grin.

"But... This isn't a private elevator..." Cameron stated, disheartened. "You can't stop me from using it..."

"Watch me." He affirmed with a wink, removing his arm, just as the metallic doors slid shut.

"Darn it! I'm never gonna get this story...!" She griped angrily, pounding a high heeled foot on the floor, as the elevator ascended away. Just then, she turned back around towards the glimmering, golden doors of the club they just exited, as fashionably dressed passengers continued to enter and leave.

"Okay..." She said to herself, taking a deep breath. "You can do this, Cam... Just keep at it!" She told herself, as she slowly began to make her way back up the stairs, towards the doors. "Remember... Don't take no for an answer!"

* * *

><p>"So, Gordon Freeman can dance..." Miranda professed in a astonishment, as the two approached the somewhat quieter escape of the Medley Bar tucked away towards the back of the club.<p>

"Well it's... been a while..." Gordon returned, with a happy shrug. "But it seems like it came to me..." He said with a jovial chuckle as the two smiling tenderly at each other, as they reached the lightly illuminated bar, which was bathed in an ambient blue glow.

"Hey there!" The bartender cordially greeted, as the two had a seat. He was a gaunt, older, black gentlemen, somewhere in his late fifties, with a salt and pepper mustache and hair, wearing a formal blue uniform, with a name tag that read: Zeus Powell.

"You two enjoying yourselves tonight?"

Gordon grinned and bowed his head before answering. For most other people, it would've been such a seemingly simple question. "Yeah..." Gordon assured, with a deep sense of joy in his voice, as turned and looked back up towards Miranda. "Yeah, we are..."

"For the first time, in a long time..." Miranda added, with a bit of a joyous tremble in her voice, as the two gazed at each other, overcome with similar sensations of hope and optimism.

"Glad to hear it..." Zeus assured with a smile and a heavy hint of compassion in his voice, as he watched the two. "So what can I get you?"

"Uh... I'll take a Thessian Dreamscape." Miranda ordered.

"...It doesn't matter." Gordon said in a happy bliss, when the bartender turned to him. "Just give me anything that'll go down smooth..."

"Two Thessian Dreamscapes coming up!" Zeus announced, as he turned to work on their drinks.

Bottles of various designs and hues lined the entirety of the illuminated back wall, creating a mural of colors and shapes. Two other bartenders, an asari and a turian in matching uniforms manned the bar further down, where an elcor was indulging in a drink. On the back shelf, a tiny ringer chimed from a metallic door in the wall, coaxing the asari bartender to open it, and pull a few bottles out. It was obviously a small elevator, used to send drinks and ingredients back and forth, probably to other clubs or restaurants. And down beside the bar's back shelf, below the wall of drinks, Gordon's eye was caught by a familiar mode of conveyance. Throughout his experiences, he had somehow managed to train himself to quickly spot these in any room he was in, should a quick escape or alternate route be necessary. But thankfully, this was one vent he wouldn't need to be crawling into.

Miranda placed her elbow on the bar, and leaned her head down onto her hand, as she looked at Gordon, with the guise of a daydreaming school girl. "You know... I've read virtually every text there is about you and the Earth Rebellion..." She began, as the bartender tended to their drinks. "I thought I knew everything there was to know about you... But I've still got so much to learn..."

"Well... same here..." Gordon replied. "At least you've done your research, heh..."

"Here you go!" Zeus announced triumphantly, interrupting Gordon, as he placed two crystalline glasses down on the bar, before him and Miranda. A cerulean colored concoction, filled with floating ice cubes, and adorned with a wedge of some strange, purple colored fruit.

Gordon furrowed his brow as he picked up the glass, and examined it closer, through his glowing, holographic lenses. "This is... blue..." Gordon said, with mild reluctance, as he placed the drink back down.

"And guaranteed to go down smooth as silk...!" Zeus proclaimed. "A bit of a frou frou drink for my tastes, but it seems to be popular with the elcor." He motioned with his towards the other end of the bar, at the elcor who was enjoying the same beverage.

Gordon shrugged his shoulders carelessly, as he raised the glass back up, and turned towards to the lavishly dressed operative.

"Well..." He began, proposing a toast. "Here's to the journey of getting to know each other better..."

"...And everywhere it may take us." Miranda concurred with a tender look reflected in her eyes. "Cheers..."

DING! The two glasses chimed, as they were tapped against each other. And as they brought their glasses up to their respective lips, for a sip, there was a slight shift in the ship's inertia. A very slight

shift, in fact, virtually undetectable. It was almost the feeling one gets when they're on a moving elevator that slows to a stop... A very similar sensation, as the Carmenta Illustria disengaged its FTL Drive...

* * *

><p>The metallic door slid open, and the lights came on low, as the two walked in.<p>

"Here we are..." Shepard announced, standing to one side at the doorway, and gentlemanly extending an arm into the room, with a bow. "Your private observation deck awaits, m'lady..."

Tali slowly walked in, and took a gradual look around at the modest, yet elegant room. It wasn't unlike the VIP boxes, at stadium sporting events. A small, private bar, with glowing shelves, illuminating a plethora of drink bottles, lined the back wall. Most of the light in the room came from this bar, with the exception of a few, dim light fixtures affixed onto the walls. Opposite the bar, a sealed, metal shutter blocked out a long, panoramic window running along the length of the room. Cushioned seats were positioned before the window, like theater seats before a movie screen. And the rest of the room was taken up by two comfortable looking perpendicular couches, and cushioned leather lounge chairs.

"This room is for us...?" Tali questioned, as she continued to look around.

"Yep..." John acknowledged, as he came to stand beside her, with his arm around her waist. "Our own private observation deck. We're on the highest point of the ship, directly beneath the dorsal fin." He explained, as he brought up his opposite arm, and materialized his omni-tool. "I rented it special, for this night."

8:31 P.M.

"And it looks like we're right on time..." He stated, as he put his omni-tool away. "I couldn't have timed this better if I wanted to."

"On time for what...?" Tali questioned, as Shepard walked her over towards the shuttered windows.

"You'll see..." He said with a big smile, as he reached out to a small, holographic panel beneath the window pane. As he pressed the button, the shutters quickly, and virtually silently, began to retract down.

A nocturne of twilight was painted behind the thick glass pane window, as the stars were suddenly revealed, burning in the distance, and floating amidst a canvas of perpetual night. And a dark silhouette seemed to hang outside. A shadowy shape, and a large one at that. It must've been a planetary mass, but it was shrouded in darkness.

"Oh, what a gorgeous view...!" Tali relayed softly, as she leaned against Shepard, who leaned back.

"Just wait..." He said, attempting to contain a nervous excitement.

"Give it a second..."

Tali rested her head upon his broad shoulder, as she watched the cosmos. She waited patiently, expecting perhaps a small shooting star to blaze by at any moment. But she was perfectly content just being by his side.

Suddenly... In the distance, a tiny, hair thin, streak of light peeked over the enormous black mass. Before long, it was a small, lavender glow. Like a candle flame in the distance. Tali raised her head up off John's shoulder, as the light slowly grew. A lavender hued crescent quickly began to take shape beneath the magnificent flare. Over the next few minutes, Tali watched in awestruck silence, as the majestic star rose above the colossal planet.

It all happened hundreds of thousands of miles away, and yet, as the room was swept in a vibrant purple hue, matching the star's luminance, she almost felt as though it were close enough that she could simply cradle the star in her hands. And she wished she could. It was such a beautiful, amazing sight... It wasn't just a sunrise, no... It was much more than that. Almost as if it were the birth of the star itself. The first star ever to exist. Like a gentle, celestial god somewhere presenting it's child as an ethereal gift to the heavens. And with their arms wrapped tightly around each other, and their heads nestled closely, they stood together, watching this gift from the cosmos unfurl...

* * *

><p>"So have you seen any more of her since you helped her and her family relocate?" Gordon questioned, leaning with his elbows against the bar, looking toward Miranda, as the two sat closely together.<p>

"No..." Miranda replied, with a hint of despondence. "Oriana and I still share an encrypted e-mail from time to time... But I'm afraid to get too close to her. I don't want to do anything that could lead my father to her..."

"Well..." Gordon began, sharing her same sorrowful tone, but forcing a smile. "At least she knows she has a sister out there that loves her. And who knows what the future holds? The day'll come when you can have a real relationship with your sister... I'm sure of it." He declared confidently.

Miranda smiled tenderly at him, as she reached out, and pulled at his arm, to clasp his hand. "I hope so..." She uttered, with a day dreaming sigh. "But right now I'm perfectly happy just having a relationship with you..." She said as she leaned towards him, and gave him a tender kiss.

"Oh good, there you are!" A shrill woman's voice suddenly exclaimed from behind, startling them a bit.

"Ugh..." Miranda groaned and rolled her eyes, quickly recognizing the voice, as the two pulled away. Gordon turned his head to see who was addressing them, not immediately recognizing the voice.

"Oh, it's you again..." Gordon stated, less than excited, when he saw the ever ambitious Cameron McClane approach them.

"Yes, uh... 'Dr. Freeman'..." She began, with a hint of skepticism in her voice, as she came up to him. "I was just hoping I could ask you a few questions..."

"Don't you know when to quit...?" Miranda demanded irritably, as she swiveled around. "We were trying to have a moment here, do you mind...? I'd really prefer not to hurt you..."

"L...ook, there's no need to get testy." McClane assured Miranda timidly, before turning back towards Gordon. "If you'll just agree to give me one, short interview, I promise I'll be out of your hair forever...!"

"Wha... what do you wanna interview me for...?" Gordon asked, frustratedly. "I mean most of the crew is on-board. Why don't you go try one of them? Besides... I'm not good with... talking..."

"I want to interview YOU... because you say you're thee Gordon Freeman!" Cameron asserted anxiously. "And I want to see if you really are who you say you are. And if you ARE, then this is an unprecedented opportunity! You're a legend... You can give new insights to the truth behind the Black Mesa incident... to the Earth Rebellion... There's so many questions that you can answer, and the public has a right to know!" She insisted.

"Sorry Miss..." Gordon politely refuted, as he turned back towards the front. "I'm not really the interviewing type."

McClane bowed her head in desperation, and released a long drawn out sigh.

"Listen..." She started up again, in a quieter, more composed tone, as she looked up. "I haven't been a reporter all that long. And I usually get stuck with all the crap assignments no one else wants..."

"Oh, boo hoo..." Miranda thought to herself, as she rolled her eyes.

"I-I practically had to beg on my hands and knees to get this assignment... And now I find out that it's not just Commander Shepard, but Gordon Freeman as well... Humanity's two greatest heroes... I mean, this is bigger than anything I ever could've hoped for... Please...?" She beckoned, with a pleading look in her eyes. "I really need this story... Just one short interview. Whaddaya say?"

Gordon sighed, and shook his head. He looked up at Miranda, who sat with her chin resting on her fist. Even her expression had softened quite a bit, as she looked back, and gave him subtle shrug. Gordon turned back around in his seat, with a bit of a scowl on his face.

"What do you wanna know...?"

* * *

><p>"Why is he still here...?" Zdrawkoh thought to himself, still stationed at his post, as he watched his superior, Commander Kim,

pace around before him, checking his omni-tool from time to time. "Is he evaluating me? Is there something I'm supposed to be doing...?" His thoughts prodded at him, as he straightened out his uniform, and composed his posture â€" attempting to make himself look as steadfast as possible.<p>

"Could he be waiting for someone...?" Zee continued to wonder, as he watched the haggard officer pace about anxiously. Just then, Commander Kim turned back around. It was only a split second glance before Zee immediately turned away, looked up at the walls, and pretended to be completely uninterested in his Commander's presence, but it was too late. Kim had already noticed.

"It's my eye, isn't it...?" Kim questioned with a bit of a snide snicker.

"...Sir?"

"My eye." Kim reiterated, as he pointed a finger up at the scarred, milky marble on the right side of his face. "It's what you're looking at, right?"

"Uh... No sir..." Zee politely denied, in a nervous state, fearful that he had offended his boss. "Of course not."

"No, it's alright." The security commander assured, as he put a halting hand up. "You know, there's a bit of a story behind it, if you're interested?"

"Uhm, sure sir..." Zdrawkoh submitted, not fully sure how else to respond. "If you'd like..."

Kim shrugged as he began. "Well, I used to be an Alliance Infantry man during the Skyllian Blitz." He explained, as he strolled over to the nearby wall, and leaned against it to spin his tale. "About two years after the attacks on Elysium, I was sent with a specialized unit to one of the outlying moons, where there were reports of batarians building underground strongholds. Me and my team were placed under the command of Major Diego Piedras..." The mere mention of the name put a sour sneer on his face, as he reflected.

"Now this guy was a complete, fucking imbecile... I mean real shit for brains!" He exclaimed, as he turned to Zee, who listened intently. "How he ever made it to the rank of Major, I'll never know. But anyway, under his orders, we made our way to one of the underground bunkers, where our intelligence had it that a large cell of insurgents were hiding out... Trouble is, you'd expect to run into a lot of resistance with a refuge like that. But it was dead quiet down there.."

Kim stopped, and bowed his head for a moment, shaking it remorsefully as he remembered the rest. He looked back up at Zee. "I knew something didn't smell right, but Piedras just kept ordering the advance... Sure enough, as we got further down, we breached one of the doors, and Boom..." He paused for a moment, biting down on his lips. "The explosives from the door caused a cave in... I was buried for two days, with a piece of shrapnel lodged in my face, before an Alliance scouting party dug us out..." Zee's eyes opened wide in amazement, as he listened.

"There were sixteen men in my squad... Three of us survived, Piedras not included... Hmph, one guy lost an arm, and both his legs from the thigh down..."

"Sir, I... I'm sorry..." Zee offered, in a stunned voice reflecting the look on his face.

Kim simply shrugged disparagingly as he continued. "Well, needless to say, the brass was pissed that we walked into such an obvious trap... They didn't want humans looking stupid in front of all the other races, so they needed someone to blame... But with Piedras dead, and since I was second in command, the honor fell on me... After I got out of the hospital, I was court-martialed and dishonorably discharged..."

"By the spirits..." Zee uttered in hushed astonishment. "I'm so sorry, sir... That's terrible..."

"Heh, forget it rookie..." Kim said, with a mild chuckle. "It's ancient history. I never looked back. The one thing I regret is that Piedras didn't survive. God as my witness, if he had lived, I would've found him, and force fed him his own children, after he watched me gut them right before his eyes..."

Zee reeled his head back, with his mouth agape, and his eyes opened wide in alarm, at the shocking notion. Kim turned to look at him, observing his stunned countenance, with a narrow gaze, and a somewhat sinister look in his eyes.

"Just kidding..." He said in a cold, emotionless tone "his eyes unflinching. "Anyway, you got the time...?" He asked, his cold stare slowly fading away, as he brought his omni-tool up. "I think my omni-tool might be off."

Zee stood there for a moment longer, with his mouth hung open, before he could react. "Uh... O-Oh, y-yes sir...!" He stuttered nervously, as he raised his omni-tool. "It's uh... 8:42."

"Yeah, same as I got..." Kim acknowledged, as he put his omni-tool away. Suddenly, there came the sound of a nearby door sliding open, followed by the sound of approaching footsteps. "I guess my omni-tool wasn't off after all..." He stated, as he looked up to see two other uniformed security officers approaching, from the same direction he had come "a turian and a salarian."

"Hello boys..." He greeted them, as Zee looked on with concern and confusion. "Right on schedule..."

* * *

><p>"The Illustria will reengage its FTL drive at precisely 8:50, Thessia Clan..." Tarrik informed, as he stood behind the asari pilot, and her turian co-pilot, while the stars streaked by in blazes, outside the forward windows. "I hope we are near our destination..."<p>

"Relax you little shit sack..." The asari admonished irately, as she worked the cargo ship's controls. "I'm about to take us out of FTL..."

Suddenly, the ship's inertia shifted, causing the diminutive volus to stumble forward a bit, into the back of the asari's seat. The brilliant streaks of light whizzing by outside quickly faded away, and in the window, far off in the distance, the white hull of a magnificent ship was bathed in a purple luminance " gleaming like a grand, coveted prize waiting to be claimed.

"There she is...!" The volus declared, with an excited gasp. "The Carmenta Illustria..." From this far out, the ship in the window looked to be the size of a child's toy, as it hung motionlessly miles away. But even so, the beauty of it's construction, and the elegance of its design was clearly evident.

"You're sure they won't be able to detect us?" Kargas' coarse krogan voice questioned from behind, with a bit of doubt, as they looked on.

"Yes..." Tarrik assured, with a deep respirator breath. "They won't see us coming. As long as Kim's done his job, and corrupted their radar systems, they should be completely blind to us..."

"Activate Leahr'Haan's jamming device," He turned to the turian co-pilot and ordered with a pointed finger. "Take us in to dock..."

* * *

><p>The observation deck was completely bathed in a splash of lavender. The windows dimmed accordingly, to offset the intense rays. And as the star burned brilliant outside, John's focus simply stayed on her the entire time. He held her tightly from behind, with his arms wrapped around her waist. And he watched her entranced eyes beguiled by the light - never once blinking, or looking away, as her mask was kissed by the gentle beams. He smiled, as a warm, nervous chill washed over him.<p>

"Keelah..." Tali uttered in a hushed voice, after watching the flare of starlight flourish. "John, this is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen..."

"It's called the Drezaraan sunrise..." He explained in a soft tone, as he held her tightly. "It's one of the highlights of the cruise. Drezaraan is one of the gas giants out here, and it's emissions are what gives the sunrise that bright purple glow..."

"It's beautiful..." Tali reiterated in an awestruck hush.

"You're beautiful..." Shepard whispered in the same tone.

She turned around in his arms to look up at him, and a single, joyous teardrop escaped her eye. He didn't see a helmet anymore... He saw her. She softly caressed his face, as he pulled her closely, and kissed the tip of her helmet. This was the perfect moment he was after...

"Come here a minute..." Shepard requested, as he backed away, holding on to her hands, and leading her along. "Here, sit down..." He said, as he brought her to the small, plush couch near the back.

Tali complied, as she studied his expression. It worried her a bit. A

few beads of sweat dotted his forehead. Something had him nervous... Anxious... It wasn't like him, but he definitely did his best to hide it.

"Tali..." John began, still holding on to her right hand, and tenderly gripping it between both his hands. "Do you remember when you told me that you watched me for so long, stand strong against everything the galaxy threw at me...?"

"Of course I do, John..."

"Well..." He continued. "If I stood strong... It was because of you, Tali... You were always my strength. My resolve... You were what gave me purpose..." He said as he smiled and looked into her eyes. "I remember the day I met you as if it were yesterday... We were rushing to save this poor, defenseless quarian, who was going to get ambushed in the alleys behind the Citadel markets... Only, by the time we got there, that poor, defenseless quarian had already taken out three of her ambushers..." He said with a laugh. "From the moment I met you, I always thought I was rushing to save your life... But now that the Reapers... Now that it's all over... I know that it was you that saved mine..."

"And now my love..." He continued, reaching into his pocket to retrieve the small velvet box he carried, as he slowly began to descend onto bended knee. "I'm going to ask that you save my life again..."

"Tali'Zorah... Will you m..."

"Oh no...! No, no, no...!" A distraught Tali exclaimed, nearly in tears, interrupting Shepard, as he held onto her hand, down on one knee before her, with a suddenly flush look on his face, and a sunken heart.

"What happened?!" She beckoned.

"This... isn't exactly the reaction I was hoping for..." He said, doing his best to keep his voice steady, as he tried to swallow back at the bile that had formed in his throat. He dismally pulled his hand out of his pocket, leaving the small, velvet box inside.

"What happened, John...?" She pleaded again, in a trembling voice. "Who died?!"

"What? Died...?" Shepard queried in a confusion, with a dumbfounded look now on his face. "What do you mean 'who died'?"

"You weren't gonna tell me that someone I know passed away?" Tali asked, now matching his confusion.

"What? No...!" John declared pointedly. "Why would you think that?!"

Tali stopped, and breathed a deep sigh of relief. "In quarian culture, when we lose a loved one, the person that bears the bad news will go down on one knee." She began to explain to the genuflecting Commander. "It is a gesture of sympathy and remorse... And it's a gesture that no quarian ever wants to see... "

"Oh..." Shepard uttered, as he suddenly understood. "I see..."

"Humans don't have anything like that?"

"Not really. Well..." He shrugged a bit, as he thought about it. "Actually, I guess when someone come up to you, and says 'you'd better sit down...' You know it's not gonna be good news..."

"So then it IS bad news?" Tali questioned, the worry in her voice slowly returning.

"What?"

"You told me to sit down..." She replied. "You said that means bad news."

"W... No... Well, not always... I mean..." John breathed a heaving sigh of frustration, as he tried to explain, before simply giving up, and starting over. "Listen..." He began. "Tali, I want this night to be perfect for us... This gesture means something very different among humans. But, if you don't like it-" He said with a warm, reassuring smile, as he rose off the floor, and took a seat beside her, with her hand still clasped between his. "-then I can say what I have to say from right here..."

"Tali'Zorah Vas Normandy Nar Rayya... Will you make me the happ..."

POW!

The entire deck quaked violently, as a sudden thunderous boom rattled the entire ship, throwing John and Tali from their seat.

All across the ship, screams could be heard, as patrons were tossed out of their seats, out of their beds, and onto the floor. Throughout the clubs, bars, restaurants, and lounges, the powerful tremor rocked every deck, like an earthquake.

"What the hell was that?!" Gordon beckoned, as he stirred on the floor, besides Miranda, Cameron, and a hanar he didn't know. "Is everyone okay?"

"Whoa... Thanks Legion..." Joker bestowed, as his mechanical teammate held him upright, by his shoulders â€" having caught him before he could collide with the floor. "I owe you one..."

Pretty much everyone else in the casino had toppled to the floor, like dominoes. Many of the gaming tables and machines were knocked over, and some smashed apart.

"What the hell just happened?" Garrus demanded, as he rose to his feet nearby, holding onto his head.

The geth's optic sensors surveyed the room, and tiny components in his head motored back and forth. "Minor impact has been sustained..."

"Wha... What was that...?" Zdrawkoh implored, in a bit of a groggy daze, as he pushed himself off the cold, steel floor.

"Argh... Those idiots!" Kim griped to himself, as he scrambled to his feet in the loading bay, along with the other three uniformed security officers.

"Are you okay?!" Shepard asked worriedly, as he lay flat on his back, with Tali on top of him.

"I-I think so..." Tali stated, in a bit of a confounded stupor, as she slowly stood up. "Are YOU okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine..." He assured, with a look of concern etched on his face, as he stood up. "But what happened? We must've hit something..."

"No..." Tali refuted in a low tone, as she shook her head slowly, and tilted her head up a bit. "No, we didn't hit anything. Something docked with the ship..."

"Docked? Are you sure...?" John questioned dubiously. "It felt like we hit something..."

"John, trust me... I've lived on ships my whole life. And something definitely just docked with us..."

7. Chapter 7: Engine Lag

****Salvation: Episode I â€" The Taking of the Carmenta
Illustria****

Disclaimer: This fan-fiction is part of an episodic series taking place after Salvation: A Half-Life/Mass Effect Universe Fan Fiction, which will lead directly to its sequel, Salvation II: Project Prometheus. These episodes and sequel take place OUTSIDE of the Mass Effect 3 continuity. Characters property of their respective companies, Half-Life created by Valve and Mass Effect created by Bioware.

Chapter 7: Engine Lag

"What just happened?!" Captain Arthur Ryback demanded, with a mixture of panic and concern. "Status report!"

He stood overlooking the bridge, trying to steady himself after having nearly been knocked over from the sudden, unexpected impact. A few of the other officers on the bridge weren't so lucky, as they scrambled back to their feet, and to their stations, to give the Captain what he asked for.

"All decks secure, sir!" A turian officer shouted, from his place at his terminal. "No damage sustained."

"Radar scans are clear, Captain!" An asari officer supplemented from a separate terminal. "We're not picking anything up..."

"What?!" Ryback demanded in disbelief, as he approached the asari's station. "What do you mean 'clear'? We were obviously just hit by something! I wanna know what that something was, and why our radar didn't pick it up sooner!"

"I'm trying, sir...!" The asari anxiously replied, as she continued to work her controls. "But our scans aren't picking up anything! No meteors, no ships, no debris of any kind...! Whatever hit us isn't showing up on the imagers..."

Captain Ryback stopped for a moment. He breathed a deep sigh, allowing himself a second to calm down. "Alright..." He continued in a more tranquil tone. "Now, you're sure you ran a full diagnostic on the radar systems?"

"Aye sir. Everything checked out fine..."

"Well, we didn't imagine that impact." He calmly yet stringently affirmed. "There's obviously something wrong with it. Run a complete diagnostic check on all systems â€" radar, imaging, external sensors, navigation... Everything! And once you're done, run it again..."

"Aye-aye, Captain. Right away."

Ryback gave a firm nod, and turned to walk to another station, leaving the asari officer to her task.

"Mister Kryk." He called out, addressing another officer â€" a nearby salarian, who by the look of it, seemed fairly spooked as he worked. "Radio the ship's security personnel. Tell them to make sure to keep the passengers calm, and to assist anyone who ma..."

"Uh, Captain Ryback, sir..." The salarian spoke up in an agitated condition, interrupting the Captain's dictation, as he frustratedly worked his station's controls. "...I can't."

"You can't...?" Ryback questioned, perplexed, as he furrowed his brow. "You can't what, Mister Kryk...?"

"I-I can't radio security, sir...!" He affirmed, shaking his head in a panic. "I can't send out any sort of communique whatsoever...!"

The news narrowed Ryback's eyes, and raised the hairs on the back of his neck.

"Something's blocking our radio communications." Kryk continued, as he desperately tried to remedy the problem, finding his attempts futile, however. "All frequencies are dead... We've lost contact with Lycuna, and we're getting nothing but static on all local channels..."

"By the Saints. It's a comm jammer..." Ryback uttered to himself, swallowing back a gulp, as he looked up, with a sinking, churning feeling settling into the pit of his stomach. "We're under attack..."

* * *

><p>"Imbeciles!" An irate volus exclaimed in an angry fit, as he picked his stubby, portly self off the floor of the Tregen Class cargo ship's bridge. "I told you dullards to DOCK with the ship, not careen into it!"<p>

A semblance of rage began to brew over the asari pilot's expression, as she straightened herself out in her seat.

"Can't you neanderthals do anything right?!"

"Argh...!" She groaned angrily, through gritted teeth, as she quickly drew her sidearm off her hip, torqued her torso around in her seat, and pressed the barrel firmly against Tarrik's head.

"Huh!? W-Wh-What are yo..."

"That tears it! I've had just about enough of your impish bullshit!" She exclaimed through her teeth, starring the horrified volus down with a terrifying sneer. "I'm a mercenary, you fat little worm! Not a pilot! You're lucky I can fly this thing at all...!"

Just then, a clicking sound came as her finger switched the machine pistol's safety off, illuminating a bright red light on its side, indicating it was ready to be fired.

"W-Wait! Stop!" Tarrik pleaded in a trembling voice, as he put his hands up helplessly. "This was my plan...! I hired you! You still need me!"

The asari's grip around the trigger began to tighten, as a sinister smile grew on her face.

"That'll do, Teshya..." The gruff voice of the towering krogan nearby interjected, moments before the volus' head could be splattered like a melon. "Put it away."

Teshya looked up at the krogan with a disappointed countenance, as she cocked her wrist back and slowly withdrew her gun from Tarrik's forehead.

"Yes sir..." She acknowledged in a disciplined tone, as she holstered her weapon "causing the volus to breath a tremendous sigh of relief.

The asari turned back around towards the front, and began to look over her controls. All the while, despite the brief altercation, her turian co-pilot never flinched, and never once took his attention away from his terminal.

Outside the forward windows, the bright lavender light from the gas giant, Drezaraan, and the nearby sun, gleamed brightly in the distance. Like a giant Remora clinging to the underbelly of an even greater behemoth shark, the small Tregen Class cargo freighter hung off the rear of the Carmenta Illustria's sealed loading bay door, as both ships floated shiftlessly together.

"You had better learn when to hold your tongue, Tarrik..." Kargas declared, as he looked down at the sniveling volus with a sneer of contempt. "I won't stop her next time..."

Tarrik looked up at the towering krogan, releasing a heavy respirator breath. Still shaking, he didn't dare utter a single word. He simply hung his head, nodded, and tried to compose himself.

"Davix, Tesh... What's our status?" Kargas demanded, as he turned back to face his fellow Blood Pack Mercenaries, who were busy fidgeting with the controls.

"Docking successful, sir." Teshya announced, however with a hint of concern in her voice. "Umbilical is connected, and pressurized."

"Yeah, but the impact knocked out our navigation..." Davix, the turian co-pilot, added with a shake of his head. "We won't be going anywhere, in this ship, anytime soon..."

"...We won't have to..." The diminutive volus hesitantly offered up, in a timid, almost frightened voice. "Once we take the Illustria's bridge, we won't be needing this ship anymore..."

Kargas nodded his large, reptilian head, as the three mercenaries were silent for a brief, contemplative moment.

"Alright, you two know what to do." The krogan asserted, addressing Davix and Teshya, as the two unfastened their seat restraints, and quickly shot up to their feet. "Arm up and move out."

* * *

><p>"What the fuck was that?!" Zdrawkoh beckoned anxiously, as he swiveled his head from side to side, looking all around the loading bay, searching for breaches or other signs of damage â€" somewhat relieved to find none.<p>

His uniformed human superior and the other two on-duty security officers had already gotten back to their feet, and were in the process of dusting themselves off, and straightening out their uniforms. But they did not seem to share Zee's concern in the slightest. The turian and the salarian officers simply stood by behind Commander Kim, patiently waiting for his instructions. They silently seemed to share a variety of subtle nods, and eye gestures â€" most of which went completely unnoticed by the wary turian rookie.

"It felt like we hit something..." Zee continued, still in a panic stricken state, as he turned around and examined the hangar sized loading bay door behind him. "Sounded like it came right from the other side of this door..."

"Nah..." Kim confidently rejected, with a nonchalant shrug of his shoulders, prompting Zee to turn around to face him. "Just felt like a little turbulence to me..." The Security Commander supplemented. "Probably just some engine lag."

"Engine lag...?" Zdrawkoh dubiously retorted, as he furrowed his brow.

"Yeah. Engine lag..." Kim reiterated, a tad more forcibly, and with a bit of a sneer on his face.

"What do you two think?" He questioned, with a hint of sarcasm in his voice, as he turned around to face his other two officers - his arms arrogantly spread apart, in an inquisitive fashion. "Didn't that feel like engine lag to you guys?"

The turian and the salarian shared a very brief glance, before turning back toward Kim.

"Yes sir." The salarian acknowledged obediently. "Engine lag if I ever felt it..."

"Yep." The turian concurred. "That's what it felt like to me..."

"See...?" Kim said, with a snide, crooked grin on his face, as he turned back around towards Zdrawkoh. "Engine lag..."

Just then, as Zee continued to look at him with a befuddled raised eyebrow, the Commander brought his hand up to the side of his head, and pressed against a communicator within his right ear canal.

"All teams..." He began in a firm, stoic tone. "This is Commander Kim. There WAS no collision. The impact we felt was just some minor engine lag. But the problem has already been taken care of... Is that understood?"

"Yes sir, understood." "Engine lag, copy that." "Affirmative." The voices relayed their acknowledgment in the Commander's ear, as he lowered his hand, and snidely shrugged at the young rookie.

"Sir...?" Zee began, in an utterly perplexed tone, matching the look in his eyes, as he shook his head slowly. "I... I don't understand... With all due respect, that did NOT feel like engine lag... It felt more like we sustained some sort..."

Suddenly, a loud crackling sound resonated from behind him, interrupting him, and causing him to give a startled jump. The crackle turned into a steady electrical buzz, as Zee rapidly spun himself around, and backed away.

"What the hell...?" Zee uttered in a stunned whisper, as he looked on.

At the base of the massive loading bay door, a flare of fire spat out a flurry of sparks, steadily blazing a red hot, straight line upward. The flare ate through the steel, leaving a small molten mound on either side of the crevice it was creating, as the door was slowly breached from the other side...

"Holy shit..." Commander Kim uttered with a gasp, from his place behind the rookie officer. "I guess you were right Zee..." He affirmed worriedly. "It wasn't engine lag... Looks like we're being boarded... Probably pirates."

"Pirates?!" Zee exclaimed to himself, in a withheld breath. "Oh spirits...!"

"And it had to happen on my first assignment..." He thought to himself, as he watched the torch cutter slice its way up the door. Bolstering his bravery and swallowing back a quick gulp, he reached for the sidearm mounted on his hip, and pulled it out. The small, silver pistol expanded in his grip, as he drew it forward, and aimed it at the door, with a slightly trembling hand. He then brought his

left hand around, and wrapped it around his grip, to steady his aim.

Just then, Zee heard the same mechanical sound of another gun expanding behind him, as it was drawn. It gave the young turian an ounce of relief at least to know that whatever sort of menace was attempting to breach the door, he wouldn't be facing it alone. If they wanted to get aboard this ship, they would have to go through this line of the Carmenta Illustria's armed secur...

Wait.. His train of thought was instantly derailed. All of a sudden, he felt something cold and firm pressing against the back of his head, beneath his fringe.

"Put 'em up, kid. Nice and easy..." Kim ordered, as he held his unique, silvery, heavy pistol to the back of Zee's head.

"C-Commander...?" The baffled turian stuttered in a dismally confused voice "his eyes batting back and forth rapidly, as he stood still aiming his pistol at the door slowly being carved out. "What is this, sir? What's going on...?"

"Mmm... Treason... Mutiny, a hijacking. Call it whatever you want." Commander Kim replied, sarcastically, with his weapon pressed firmly against the back of the turian's skull. "Point is we're taking the ship, so put your hands up nice and slowly. I'll not ask again...!"

Zdrawkoh clenched his eyes shut, as he slowly drew his arms back, and raised them besides his head, with his sidearm still clutched in one of his hands, pointed up towards the ceiling.

"Gentlemen... Kindly relieve the rookie of his weapon."

* * *

><p>"Is everyone alright!?" An asari security officer shouted out, over the commotion of the crowd, in the center of the Casino on the Promenade Deck. "Does anyone need medical attention!?"<p>

Most of the stately dressed patrons were already back on their feet, but it was mostly in a haze of confusion. The room was filled with a collective murmur, as the passengers chattered in disorientation.

"What happened?!" "What was that?!" "Did we crash?" "We hit something!"

Panic was etched on many of their faces, as they worried about their safety. For the most part, none of them seemed to have endure any real physical harm - perhaps a bump on the head, a chipped fringe, a bruised mandible, a scratched tentacle, but nothing serious. Still, on a cruise getaway that is known for perfection, down to the last detail "for many, a turbulent snafu such as this one, was cause for alarm...

"There is no cause for alarm!" The asari guard continued, ushering a silence over the crowd, as she addressed the frightened rabble. "We have verified the problem, and it was nothing more than a minor case

of engine lag. Our engineers already have the problem well under control, and we'll be underway shortly! Please, continue as you were. If there's anyone who needs medical attention, you can come to me, or any of the security personnel stationed at the exits, around the casino. We apologize for the inconvenience, and again, there is absolutely nothing to worry about. So please, as you were!"

The passengers seemed to exhale a collective sigh of relief, in unison, as the asari officer finished her comforting address. The instant she was done, the atmosphere changed to one of alleviated joy. The chatter turned to chuckles, and laughs as they went back to their recreation. Many placed their hands over their chests, with wide eyed, nervous enthusiasm, as they explained how scared they were, but now they were suddenly overcome with relief...

"Engine lag...?" Jacob questioned in a low, dubious tone, as he stood in a small circle, with five other familiar faces. "That didn't feel like any damn engine lag to me..."

"This thing may not be the Normandy, but I know a collision when I feel one." Joker tensely concurred. "Something definitely hit us. Felt like it came from the stern of the ship... Maybe a stray asteroid..."

"Yes." Legion added in a metallic, monotonous voice. "Our consensus corroborates Moreau, Helmsman's statement. Minor impact has been sustained. Damage extent, unknown."

"Hmm..." Garrus pondered to himself, as he tapped his finger against his chin. "Well, they were sure quick on giving everyone the all clear..."

"What are you thinking?" Jacob queried, worried he was thinking the same thing.

"I'm thinking that something's wrong..." Garrus continued. "And they don't wanna cause a panic. Maybe there's a bigger problem than they're letting on. Extensive damage, or a problem with the life support or something..."

"Oh man...!" Joker cried out, in frustrated anxiety. "I knew it! I knew this would happen! I knew the moment I agreed to go on this damn cruise, it was gonna turn into the Titanic!"

"The what?" Grunt demanded, with a confused look on his face.

"You know. The Titanic!" Joker reiterated.

"Relax, Joker..." Jacob instructed, as she shook his head slightly. "This is not gonna turn into the Titanic..."

"What's the Titanic...?" Garrus queried, sharing in Grunt's befuddlement.

"Nothin'." Jacob declared, waving a dismissive hand in front of him. "It's a human thing."

"Well, probability of potentially life threatening situation, unlikely..." Mordin supplemented, continuing the conversation. "If that were case, procedure dictates all passengers would be led to

life pods immediately, in the event of emergency... Still. Claiming impact to be result of engine lag... Peculiar."

"Yeah..." Garrus nodded in agreement. "I still think there's something wrong. What exactly, I don't know, but I got a funny feeling..."

"What do you think we should do?" Jacob asked, with a subtle shrug of his shoulders. "I mean, we're technically civilians on this cruise."

"I say we go camp out near the life pods...!" Joker blurted out anxiously, forcing a crooked smile to indicate he was at least partially kidding. "Screw women and children first! I've got Vrolik Syndrome, damn it!"

"Would you take it easy...!" Jacob demanded with an angry sneer.

"Take it easy?!" Joker exclaimed, in a fit of anxiety. "There aren't enough life pods for everyone on-board, and you want me to take it easy!?"

"What...?!" Garrus beckoned with a furrowed brow, and a dumbfounded gaze. "Who said there aren't enough life pods?"

"There're never enough life pods!"

Garrus raised a perplexed eyebrow at the overly agitated Joker. "What are you tal..." He stopped mid-sentence, and shook his head, before continuing on. "... Ugh, never mind. Look... For now, lets just go on as if nothing happened. It's pointless to get worked up, and start jumping to conclusions... Maybe it really was nothing. But if it turns out that there's some sort of problem or disaster..." He stopped, as he released a heavy sigh, with an unsure shrug of his shoulders. "Well, then we'll just see what we can do to help. In the meantime, let's all just try to relax..."

"Hmph..." Grunt scoffed, with a heavy snort, as a small grin grew on his face. "Maybe we'll finally get some excitement on this trip..."

* * *

><p>"This one thanks you, human..." A hanar graciously bestowed, to a tux clad physicist, after he made sure he was well and unharmed.<p>

"No problem..." Gordon replied, though not actually looking at the hanar. His attention was elsewhere, as his narrowed eyes scanned the room. Something wasn't sitting well with him, but he tried to dismiss his concerns, and looked back towards the hanar. "You good?"

"Yes." The hanar assured, in a cordial, almost ethereal voice. "This one is unharmed, but wonders what caused the unexpected turbulence..."

"Yeah, you and me both..." He uttered in a hushed voice, as he turned back towards Miranda.

She held a very similar guise on her face, as she too scanned the room, with look of wary concern. Again, by now most of the patrons were back up, onto their feet, but they were in an uproar of confusion and distress. The music had stopped, the dancing had ceased, and a loud, muddled murmur filled the room.

"Darn it...! I broke a heel..." Cameron griped to herself, as she leaned against the nearby bar, with her right leg crossed over her left knee in a figure four, examining the sole of one of her sky blue shoes. "Damn, cheap shoes..." She complained, as she yanked at the stiletto heel, hanging off the sole by a thin piece of cloth, tearing it off.

Gordon came to stand beside Miranda, who stood out a few feet away from the bar, looking out towards the crowd, ruminating on something.

"You know..." Gordon began, with a leery voice, and a look of suspicion in his eyes. "This is only the second starship I've ever been on. But judging by the reaction of this crowd, I'd say a tremor like that is fairly uncommon..."

"Well, I'm sure it's not unheard of..." Miranda replied, as she turned to look at him, reflecting the same uneasy glance, although trying hard to subside it. "But these ships tend to stay clear of areas with heavy debris, and they're supposed to be designed with state-of-the-art sensory equipment. They should be capable of detecting and avoiding anything that could cause an impact like that... But accidents will happen, I suppose..." She said with an ambivalent shrug.

"Yeah..." Gordon replied, letting his eyes drift off pensively, as he looked to the side. Just then, he stopped, and turned back towards her.

"You're sure you're okay...?" He questioned worriedly, as he placed his arm around Miranda's back.

"Hmph, yes Gordon, for the third time, I'm fine...!" She affirmed, with a bit of a snickering laugh and a smile, albeit touched by his show of concern. "After everything we've both been through, you should know that it takes a lot more th..."

"Ladies and Gentlemen, can I have your attention please?" A booming voice echoed loudly throughout the dance club, causing everyone to suddenly turn and devote their full attention towards the stage.

The spotlights shone down on the same salaried announcer, who had been introducing the evening's entertainment, as a drell in a security uniform briskly stepped out of sight, off the stage.

"I've just been informed by security that the tremor we felt was nothing more than a little turbulence as a result of some minor engine lag." The salaried man informed the nervous crowd. "But there's nothing to worry about. The problem has already been corrected, and we should be moving again any minute. So let's keep the party goin' and the music flowin'! Hit it!" He turned and shouted to the band on stage, quickly prompting a lively tune to start again.

The house lights dimmed to darkness, and the ceiling flashed with

vibrant hues, as the room once again pounded with the fast beat of the music. Reluctantly, the attending guests began to show their relief by returning to dance floor, and to their drinks.

"Well...!" Cameron's voice chimed in, talking over the music, as she came to stand on Gordon's other side. "That's the last time I buy shoes off the Extranet...!" She claimed jokingly, looking down at her former high heeled pumps, now turned flats. She was, however, unsuccessful in achieving any sort of reaction from the physicist, who simply stood staring out at the crowd, with a nagging sensation.

"Strange engine lag..." Miranda said, with a somewhat reluctant shrug of her shoulders. "But I guess it was nothing..."

"Hmm..." Gordon simply stood there, as his eyes scanned the lavish dance hall back and forth, making some sort of silent assessment.

"Oh, well...!" Cameron interjected cheerfully, as she raised her arm, and brought her omni-tool forth. "Whatever it was, at least the problem's been fixed." She said, punching a few keys onto the projection, before she turned and looked up at Gordon. "So... shall we go ahead and begin that interview now...?"

"Yeah, l-later, later..." Gordon replied, showing a mild annoyance, as he raised his hand towards her. "I'm getting that strange feeling again..."

"Feeling?" Cameron queried, in confusion.

"What feeling...?" Miranda beckoned, with a mixture of tenderness and concern in her voice.

Gordon stopped, and looked her, as the hairs on the back of his neck involuntarily stood up, followed by an icy chill.

"...A feeling like something's about to go terribly wrong..." He said, hoping deep down it was nothing more than his own traumatic anxieties getting the better of him. But this nagging sensation was becoming quite overwhelming...

"The same feeling I had the morning of the Resonance Cascade..."

* * *

><p>POW! The loud thud of steel slamming onto steel resounded throughout the loading bay, as the thick, heavy, slab cutout of the loading bay door toppled forward, and fell flat. In the gaping hole left, surrounded by molten, seared metal, stood Davix, the armored turian co-pilot, wielding an ignited plasma cutter.<p>

"Knock knock...!" He said, with a sinister grin on his face.

"Hello, Davix..." Kim greeted with a smirk.

"Commander Kim..."

The turian stepped into the loading bay, followed by several others, as Zdrawkoh looked on, with his wrists bound tightly behind him by

handcuffs. He had been stripped of his gun belt, and despite the restraints, the rookie was still being well guarded, by his own fellow security officers – one standing at each side, holding his shoulders back. The one thought that continually ran through his head, was probably the same thing that anyone in his situation would be thinking... "What are they gonna do to me...?"

A miniscule volus stepped forth, along with a green headed krogan, and an armor clad asari, wearing a sour expression.

"Kargas..." The Security Commander greeted with a nod.

"Kim..." The krogan mercenary reciprocated, before proceeding forward.

"And Tarrik..." Kim continued, with a frustrated sigh, and a condescending tone, as he looked down at the stubby lifeform in a brown body suit. "You know, for someone who doesn't want any of the passengers to know what's going on, until after we've taken the bridge... You sure as hell did a good job of making your presence known..."

"I wasn't the one flying..." Tarrik uttered with a heavy respirator breath.

"You got a problem with the way I fly, human?" The armored asari pilot demanded, jabbing a stiff index finger into the Security Commander's chest, as she glared an angry hole right through him.

"Oh, so it was you Tesh...?" Kim replied, slyly eying the asari. from top to bottom, with a covetous smirk. "Still trying to hide those feelings you have for me, I see... Sweetheart, if you want me, all you have to do is ask..."

"Ugh..." Teshya sneered in disgust, as she continued on past him. "Human filth..."

"Yeah, don't worry baby..." He called out avariciously, as he turned to watch her walk away. "We'll get some private time later...!"

"Commander Kim." Tarrik interjected sternly, as he watched the enticed, one eyed human lick his lips, before he turned back down towards the volus.

"Are your men in position?"

"My men are ready, and waiting..." Kim affirmed, as he crossed his arms. "They'll move as soon as I give the order. When we take the ship, they'll corral all the passengers into the Casino Deck. The whole floor is basically one big room. Easy to keep an eye on all the exits. Plus, there's a promenade that goes all the way around the deck. We can keep a roving patrol there at all times."

"Excellent, Commander." The appeased Tarrik assured, before turning his attention to the young rookie prisoner. "And who is this...?" He questioned, as he pointed a stubby finger at Zdrawkoh.

"Hehe, this-" Kim began, pulling a silver case out of his pocket, as

he walked up to the bound rook, with a conniving grin. "-is 'Officer Zee'. The newest edition to my security force." He continued, as he pulled out a cigarette, and placed it between his lips.

"Unfortunately, since I didn't have time to break him in..." He said in a muddled voice, as he raised a lighter to his cigarette, and ignited it's tip. "He's just gonna be another hostage..." Kim affirmed, before inhaling, and pulling the cigarette out of his lips, only to blow a disparaging cloud of smoke into the turian's face. "Or a casualty if he decides to act up..."

Zee coughed a bit, and cleared his throat, as the smoke enveloped his face. When it cleared, he glared at the human Commander, shaking his head with a look of disillusion, and anger.

"How...? How can you do this...? WHY would you do this?!"

"Hahahaha!" The naive question caused Kim to break out into a condescending cackle. "And you wanna work for C-Sec...? The galaxy's an ugly place kid. Open your eyes..."

"Get him outta here." He ordered, addressing the two restraining guards. "Keep him quiet until we take the ship. Then put him with the others."

"Yes sir." The salarian acknowledged, as he and the other officer pulled the struggling Zee along, dragging him through the loading bay against his will.

"Hmhmhmhm..." Kim laughed under his breath, as he brought his lit cigarette back to his lips. Suddenly, he heard a peculiar sound. Like that of soldiers marching, but it was accompanied by a series of strange, mechanical buzzes. And it was getting louder. It seemed to be coming from the gaping hole leading to the adjoined cargo ship.

"What the hell is that...?" Kim questioned, as he turned and peered into the umbilical sleeve passageway.

Out from within, marched a small squadron of slender, mechanical soldiers. They were mostly white, accented with black and red, standing about the height of an average human, although their figure more closely resembled that of a salarian's. Their helmet shaped heads were marked with two, brightly illuminated, optic scanners, in the shape of two half circles, forming a figure eight. And each one of them clutched a sub-machine gun tightly, across their chests.

"Hey, whoa, what's with the mechs?!" Kim demanded, furrowing his brow in anger, as the mechs continued to march into the room.

As they did, a lone quarian also made his way out, quickly weaving in between them. He carried a small, portable terminal, folded under his left arm, and his right was encased by his omni-tool, as he punched in a plethora of keys " never taking his eyes away from his work.

"My people can handle this job, Tarrik!" Kim asserted, repeatedly

pointing his index finger into his own chest. "We don't need any help from no damn mechs...!"

"Relax..." Kargas' deep, gruff voice insisted, as he stepped up to the Security Commander. "The mechs were my idea..."

Kim turned to face the krogan, with a still stoic, although somewhat humbled expression now on his face. Commander Kim may not have been a short man, at six foot, two, but he still knew enough to grant the bigger, heftier krogan his due respect.

"We hit an Exo-Geni cargo freighter a couple of weeks ago..." Kargas continued. "We thought it was hauling eezo and omni-gel. But instead we ended up with a bunch of these. Tarrik's quarian was able to get them up and running." He said, as he pointed towards the burgundy veiled quarian, drawing Leahr's attention away from his work momentarily. "So rather than breaking them down for scrap metal, we decided to make use of 'em."

"Alright..." Kim submitted, raising his eyebrows with a shrug and a sigh. "I won't argue with YOU Kargas. But we'll have to keep them down here until I give the order."

"They're self guiding..." Leahr'Haan assured, with a reserved, lamented tone. "They've been programmed with a complete layout of the ship, and I can deploy them at any time..."

"Good. Then keep 'em here until I tell you otherwise." Kim instructed, before turning back to face Tarrik and Kargas.

"Let's get moving." He ordered, motioning for them to follow. "We've wasted enough time. No doubt Ryback's already figured out something's up. There ain't much he can do with communications down, but still..." He said, as the six proceeded forward, through the loading bay, in the same direction Zee was dragged away. "We'll take the service elevators. Its the fastest way to get up to the bridge, without drawing any attention. "

* * *

><p>"Yes, something definitely docked with this ship..." Tali expressed, with conviction and concern, as she paced around the private observation deck anxiously, while Shepard worked his omni-tool. "From the sound and feel of it, I'd say it was a small vessel... A merchant freighter, or a transport shuttle, maybe..."<p>

"It could've been a ship in distress..." She continued, with uncertainty, as she stopped pacing, and turned to face Shepard. "With everything going on back on Earth, and the Citadel, there can't be too many patrols around... Maybe there was nothing closer...?"

The Commander didn't look up at her, as she finished. The room was still bathed in the soft, lavender caress from the star outside. And they were both still dressed for a night of gala enchantment. But his mind had strayed far from where it was a few tender moments ago, from his place on bended knee. Now, he simply studied his omni-tool feverishly, with a growing look of suspicion on his face. Something was definitely wrong...

"John...?"

"Tali... Check your omni-tool..." He softly requested, as he looked up, and put his away. "See if you can make any calls or open a comm link of any sort."

Tali's head reeled back a bit, surprised by his request, as an addled expression grew on her face beneath her mask. But without questioning it, she brought up her omni-tool, and began manipulating it. Shepard crossed one arm over the breast of his tuxedo jacket, and clasped his chin, and lower lip pensively, with his other hand, as he watched her "waiting to hear a result, and hoping his suspicions would not prove true.

"Wait... Th-This is strange..." Tali remarked, in a voice growing heavy with worry, and confusion. "I... I can't get any sort of signal. Every channel is either dead, or completely blocked by interference... Keelah..." She uttered, raising her head to look back up at John, as she suddenly came to a realization. "...I don't think it was any merchant freighter that docked with us..."

"Communications are being jammed, aren't they?" The Commander questioned, with a rigid nod, and a scowl on his face, as he crossed both arms.

"Yes..." Tali acknowledged, with a lamented sigh, drawing her attention back down to her omni-tool. "And from the look of it, very thoroughly... Every channel's been completely disabled. If there are any communications, it's being done over an encrypted frequency..."

"Pirates, you think?"

"Doubtful..." She refuted, shaking her head with conviction. "I've never heard of pirates using anything this sophisticated. Mercenaries maybe, but not pi..."

"Anyone in here?" A male voice suddenly called out, as the door to the observation room unexpectedly slid open. John and Tali immediately turned towards the door, with a jerk, and primed their stances for combat.

"Whoa, easy there...!" The armed security officer nervously exclaimed, at the couple that looked ready to charge him, before they noticed his uniform.

"Doug Strenners. Illustria Security." The human identified himself, as he walked further in, towards the couple obscured by the shadows in the room. "Sorry folks, didn't mean to startle y-y-y-yo..." He suddenly stopped and sputtered nonsensically, pointing a finger up at the broad build of the man who stepped into the light before him. "Y-y-y-you're... C-Commander Shepard...!"

"Good, security..." John acknowledged, with a tinge of relief, as he stepped towards the babbling officer. "What can you tell me about the situation? What do you know?"

"S...situation...?" Strenners replied with a hiss, batting his eyes around somewhat nervously. "There's no situation, sir... I... I just

came to make sure everyone was alright, and see if anyone needed any help..."

"He doesn't know..." Tali uttered in a soft, surprised voice.

"Listen to me carefully, Doug..." Shepard began again, taking a serious expression, and a dire demeanor, as he stepped closer to the security officer. "We may have a very serious problem on our hands. That impact we felt a moment ago? We've got reason to believe that the ship may have been docked with by a hostile vessel..."

"H-hostile vessel?" Strenners returned, forcing a nervous smile and a tone of blissful ignorance, as he shook his head. "No, no, sir. You've got it all wrong. It was just a bit of harmless engine lag... Believe me, everything's fine...! There's nothing to worry about here..."

"Engine lag...?" Tali replied questioningly, as she stepped up beside Shepard. "No. Trust me, that was no engine lag. I should know."

"Listen, we don't got a lot of time." The Commander informed, with a shake of his head. "I don't know what exactly's going on yet, but there's definitely something amiss. Check your radio. Communications are being jammed..."

"Uh..." Strenners turned away nervously, bringing two fingers up to his communicator, although not actually pressing it, as beads of sweat began to condense on his forehead.

"I need you to come with us." Shepard ordered resolutely, as he stepped past the security officer, towards the door. "We're gonna find my team, find any other security personnel, and get to the bottom of this..."

Tali stepped around the officer, and walked over towards Shepard, already by the observation deck entrance, leaving Strenners behind, nervously fidgeting with his hands; rubbing them around like a person lathering soap.

"Officer!" Shepard yelled out, when he noticed Strenners frozen in place. "I need you to come with us! You know this ship better than we do, we may need your help."

"Uhm... I..." Strenners stuttered with a gulp, as he closed his eyes, and drew a deep breath, trying to find the nerve for what he was about to do.

"I-I can't let you do that, sir..." He asserted, doing his best to hide the shakiness in his voice, as he turned around, pulled his sidearm off his belt, and aimed it at Shepard's head. "I'm sorry..."

"What the hell..." John uttered, sounding more frustrated than anything else.

"He's part of it...!" Tali supplemented, with a mixture of surprise and disdain.

"I'm gonna have to ask you to come with me, sir..." Strenners boldly demanded, with a bolstered resolve, despite the pistol trembling in his grip. "Please don't resist. I don't wanna have to shoot you..."

Shepard glanced over at Tali, and ever so slightly motioned an unspoken instruction with his eyes, to which Tali acknowledged with the slightest of nods.

"Now put your hands up!"

"Okay..." The Commander obediently acknowledged, as he and Tali raised their arms up.

"Turn around! Hands on your head!" Strenners barked.

"No problem..." Shepard assured submissively, as he and Tali slowly turned around, and locked their hands behind their heads. "Just take it easy... We're unarmed, and we don't wanna get hurt... We'll do whatever you say."

The human guard lowered his pistol a bit, breathing a sigh of relief at how smoothly this was going, as he pulled a pair of silver handcuffs out of a compartment on the rear of his belt.

Commander Shepard held his breath for a moment â€" not wanting the sounds of his own respiration to interfere. He poignantly tuned his hearing, as he listened to the clicking of handcuffs, followed by the light patter of Strenners' footsteps approaching on the carpet. The only breathing he could hear, was the guards' â€" just what he wanted.

"No sudden moves now..."

Strenners buried his pistol's barrel between the Commander's shoulder blades, as he reached out towards John's wrist, with an open pair of jingling cuffs in hand. Suddenly! "UMPH!" A blur of motion! A sharp pain! In a matter of milliseconds, Shepard spun himself around counter-clockwise, using the broad of his shoulder to force the weapon safely to the side. He immediately locked the armed appendage beneath his, spun Strenners to the floor, slamming him, and pinning him down hard, as he disarmed his hand - twisting the pistol out of his grip, and torquing the arm behind his back in a way it shouldn't bend.

"AARGH!" Strenners cried out in agony, with his eyes clenched tightly, and his right cheek mashed down against the carpeted floor. "AHH! LET ME GO!"

"Tali..." John calmly handed the pistol to his satin dressed lover, keeping Strenners pinned under his weight, and maintaining his arm locked back painfully. "Just keep that right on him..." He said, with a mildly devious grin, as she took the pistol and calmly aimed it down at the futilely struggling officer.

"Oh please...!" He pleaded in a pained voice, breathing rapidly, with his eyes clenched tightly. "Argh! Please, don't kill me!"

"Shut up!" Shepard barked angrily. "Now here's how we're gonna do

this. I'm gonna ask you some questions... For every question you don't answer, or for every answer I get that I don't like â€" your arm bends a little... Like this."

"MMPH! ARGH! AHHH!" Strenners cried out in anguish, pounding his free fist on the floor, with a tormented look on his face, as Shepard briefly torqued his arm back further, before loosening the pressure again. It got the point across.

"And I'll keep bending it until it snaps..." The Commander affirmed, with a sinister tone, inflicting the necessary intimidation. "Then we'll start with the other arm. Do you understand...?"

The officer didn't respond. He simply breathed rapidly, keeping the side of his face planted on the plush, carpeted floor.

"I'll take that as a no..." Shepard stated, as he worked the arm back further, once more.

"Ahh! AHH! Yes, I understand! I UNDERSTAND!"

"Good..." John snidely acknowledged, as he loosened his grip. "Then we can begin. Now... What's going on?"

"I don't know..." Strenners replied brashly, under his labored breaths.

"Wrong answer."

"Ahh! Ahh! Hi-hija-hijack! The ship's being hijacked!" The officer immediately screeched, as the unbearable twang of pain shot through his arm and shoulder.

"Hijacked?" Shepard questioned, briefly looking up at Tali, as he eased the tension, bringing Strenners another moment of relief. "By who? Pirates? Slavers?" He demanded, looking back down at the squirming guard.

"I don't know..." Strenners uttered in a gasping, pleading voice.

"You've got a real problem with comprehension, don't you Doug?"

"Ahh! Ahh-I-I I don't know!" He cried out, slamming his open palm down on the carpet â€" his forehead soaked in perspiration, as his arm was bent back forcibly. "Seriously, I don't know! Uhh-I-I swear! I don't know the whole plan, I just know my job! Ahh! Please...!"

Believing his pleas, at least for now, the Commander eased the pressure.

"Ugh... Oh, thank you..." The captive muttered gratefully, in a shaky voice, with his face half buried on the floor. "...Like I said, I don't know the whole plan." He continued. "All I know, is I was supposed to clear the observation deck... When Commander Kim gives the order, all the passengers are gonna be gathered up in the Casino, on the Promenade Deck... And they're gonna take 'em for everything their worth..."

"Commander Kim...?" Shepard said to himself, in a whisper, with a furrowed brow. There was something about that name he wanted to recognize, something familiar, but he couldn't figure it out.

"Who docked with the ship?" Tali queried, still aiming the pistol down at the officer's head.

"I don't know..." Strenners quickly answered, with a hefty breath. "I've heard mention of the Blood Pack. A krogan, and a volus... But I don't really know who they are..."

"The Blood Pack are mostly thugs..." Tali stated, as she glanced up at John, keeping her pistol keenly aimed however. "I doubt they'd use such a sophisticated comm jammer. Eclipse, or the Blue Suns maybe. But not the Blood Pack..."

"They wouldn't..." Shepard declared, still keeping Strenners tightly pinned. "The Blood Pack would just fire on the ship from the outside, board, and come in shooting. They wouldn't waste time with comm jammers. And they wouldn't run with a volus, unless they had something to gain from it. Chances are he's the one master minding this."

The Commander turned his attention back down to his restrained victim, whom he held in complete submission. "So what's your involvement in all this?"

"We just take our orders from Commander Kim..." Strenners weakly replied, sounding completely out of breath. "We've all got our jobs... Mine was to clear the top observation decks, and wait for the Commander's order..."

"Wait, 'we'?!" John demanded in shock. "You mean besides you and this Commander Kim, there are other members of security in on this...? How many?"

"..."

"How many?!"

"AHH! Okay! Okay! All of us!" He cringed in pain, as Shepard put the squeeze on again. "We're all in on it...! About forty guys or so. All except the new kid, I don't think he knows..."

"The ship's entire security outfit..." John uttered with a mix of concern and disbelief in his voice, and on his expression, as he looked up at Tali, shaking his head. "How the hell does an entire security team go rogue...?"

"I dunno, man..." Strenners stated in a pleading, trembling voice, sounding almost in tears. "I guess it seemed like a good idea at the time... And Commander Kim made it sound so easy... So worth it... It just made sense, you know? You get so sick of earning a meager living to protect the richest people in the galaxy. Watching 'em live it up and stuff their faces while the rest of us have to scrape by... It just didn't seem fair..."

"Whether you think it's fair or not, it was your job to protect them, not betray them!" Shepard snapped in a rage, torquing the officer's

arm back a little harder, causing him to writhe around agonizingly. "You don't like it, find a job somewhere else!"

"Okay man, okay!" Strenners pleaded through clenched teeth, sweating profusely, and taking breaths in droves. "I'm sorry! Please, just let me go Commander! I told you everything I know, I swear! Please, please don't kill me! Just let me go, Shepard. Please...!"

"I should kill you!" The Commander exclaimed angrily, still holding his arm back, but slowly easing the tension. "But I'm not going to..."

"Oh god, thank you... Thank you so much, Commander..." His prisoner uttered under his breath, while exhaling a deep sigh of palpable relief.

"Stand up. Slowly..." Shepard ordered, still keeping a keen grip on the officer's twisted arm, as he pulled his weight off him, and got to his feet.

With his body liberated, the rogue officer rose to his knees â€" the markings of pain still etched on his face. He drew one foot forward, planted it on the carpet, and pushed himself to his feet. Tali took a step back, relinquishing her aim on officer, as she drew back her arm, pointing the pistol upward in a idle position.

"Alright..." Shepard began, still holding Strenners arm locked behind his back, as he batted his eyes around nervously, hoping any moment he'd be set free. "Now this is gonna hurt for a bit..."

"What?! Gaugh!" Strenners gagged, and wrestled ferociously, as Shepard released his hold on the guard's arm, and wrapped his thick upper arm around his neck â€" all in a single, blistering motion. The rogue security officer coughed, gasped, and gagged, as he feverishly tried working his fingers between his neck, and Shepard's arm to pry it off, but it was no use... He kicked, and struggled, and writhed, and squirmed, until his violent thrashing slowly faded â€" the fight slowly being sucked out of him, as his blood flow was restricted. With one final gasp, Strenners' eyes closed, and his arms fell limp at his sides.

With his culprit subdued, Shepard loosened his grip, and gently lowered the motionless Strenners to the ground, lightly laying him down.

"Whew..." Shepard wiped his brow a bit as he stood back up.

"Is he dead?" Tali questioned, as she walked around the peaceful looking officer, towards John, looking down at his handiwork.

"No..." He assured, with a confident shake of his head, as he started to look around the room. "Just unconscious."

Just then, a silver gleam from the floor caught Shepard's eye. He bent down, to pick up the sturdy pair of handcuffs, originally meant for him, and moved over towards the incapacitated guard. He reached out, taking hold of Strenners' right arm, locking one of the restraints around his wrist. Holding on to the cuffs, the Commander took another quick glance around the room. It wasn't long before he

spotted something suitable. He pulled at Strenners' arm, dragging him along towards the front of the observation room, and the long metal railing running along the panoramic window. Shepard sat the unconscious officer up, with his back towards the window, and locked both his wrists up over his head, securely fastening him to the rail with the handcuffs.

"He should come to in about half an hour, but he's not going anywhere..." The Commander declared, as he stood back up.

He turned to face Tali, shaking his head, as he placed his hands on his hips. "And we've still got a problem..."

Suddenly, a faint, muffled chatter drew their attention back down to the unconscious man before them. It was the buzzing of a tiny, imperceptible voice resonating from the motionless officer's ear.

With a look of uncertainty on his face, John bent down, and plucked the communicator out of the security guard's ear canal. Standing back up, he looked to Tali and raised his eyebrows nervously, as he affixed the communicator to his ear. Knowing full well that he couldn't convincingly mimic Strenners' voice, he decided to try something else.

"Hello? Strenners, come in. Do you copy?" A male voice beckoned from the other end. "Strenners are you there? What's going on? Come in!"

"Argh... Ahem... Uh, yeah, Strenners here!" John declared in a coarse, throaty voice, doing his best to imitate what the blacked out guard would sound like with an irritated throat. "I read you."

"Doug...? What's going on?" The other voice suspiciously inquired. "Why didn't you answer? And what the hell's wrong with your voice?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing... Ahem..." Shepard began again, lightly coughing and clearing his throat, with the same grizzled voice. "Just stopped to have a quick drink. Turned out to be Ryncol. Got to me a little."

"Oh..." The male voice submitted, sounding convinced and at ease. "Well stop screwin' around, we got work to do. Are the observation decks cleared?"

"Uh, yeah... Yeah, check, we're all clear here." The impersonating Commander replied. "All observation decks secure."

"Okay, good." The voice in his ear replied. "Well, get ready to round everyone up then. Commander Kim'll probably give the order any minute."

"Roger that. Ahem. Strenners' out."

Shepard pulled his finger away from his ear, as a small crooked grin grew on his face.

"That actually worked!?" Tali beckoned, with a heavy sense of

disbelief.

"Yeah, I can't believe it either, heh..." Shepard replied, with a mildly sarcastic chuckle.

"So what do we do now?"

"We have to get word out to either the Alliance, or the Citadel, somehow..." He answered. "Let 'em know what's happening, and get 'em to send help."

"Hmm..." Tali uttered pensively, as she bowed her head, and placed a curved finger over her helmet's mouthpiece. "Well whatever's disrupting communications is probably on the ship that docked with us. If we can reach it, I should be able to hack into it, and open up a secondary frequency... But I'll need my tools for that. And I left them back in our Stateroom..."

"You actually brought your tools along...?" The Commander queried, laughing a little under his breath.

"John, I'm a quarian... We don't go anywhere without some sort of tools." She added, crossing her arms over her dress, and leaning a bit to her right. "We might need to make basic suit repairs at anytime. But I didn't bring everything... I left most of my defense and combat mods back on the Normandy..."

"Well, we don't have much choice..." He replied, wearily. "We have to get that distress call out."

Commander Shepard stopped and exhaled a long, frustrated sigh, as he bowed and shook his head. He gazed up at Tali, clenching his lips tightly, with a remorseful look in his eyes.

"So much for a nice, relaxing vacation..."

8. Chapter 8: The Taking Part I

Salvation: Episode I â€" The Taking of the Carmenta Illustria

Disclaimer: This fan-fiction is part of an episodic series taking place after Salvation: A Half-Life/Mass Effect Universe Fan Fiction, which will lead directly to its sequel, Salvation II: Project Prometheus. These episodes and sequel take place OUTSIDE of the Mass Effect 3 continuity. Characters property of their respective companies, Half-Life created by Valve and Mass Effect created by Bioware.

Chapter 8: The Taking (Part I)

Lambs to the Slaughter

The door to the bridge slid open, and in rushed a short, out-of-breath, human crewman, sweating, and panting heavily. When he ran in, the frantic operations on the bridge seemed to come to a standstill for just a moment, as every crew member turned to him â€" hoping for some shred of reassurance. The reassurance they were quickly denied when they saw he was alone, and the grimace he held

upon his face. It was a look of dread in his eyes, as he shook his head, and tried to force words out of his mouth.

"C-Captain Ryback, sir!" He called out, in a heaving, panicked voice, as he hunched over, with his hands on his thighs, trying to catch his breath. "There's no...! I-I couldn't find...! They're gone! There's no one...!"

"Whoa, whoa, take it easy, lad..." The burly Captain urged, putting a hand up at the short-winded crewman. "Slow down, take a breath..."

The officer stopped, nodded his head, and tried to regain his composure. His breathing slowly grew quieter, and less labored, as he began to calm down.

"Now... Tell me what happened. Slowly..." The Captain calmly ordered.

"I couldn't find anyone, sir..." The crewman began again, still sounding slightly short of breath, but in less of a rant. "I went as far back as the aft passenger staterooms, and all the way up to the fo'c'sle... There's no security personnel nearby, whatsoever..."

"That... That's just not possible!" Ryback retorted, in a voice somehow resounding with both conviction and uncertainty. "There are supposed to be at least five guards stationed within the immediate vicinity of the bridge, at all times..."

"I know, sir!" The officer acknowledged, in a fright filled tone. "But I looked... There aren't any around!"

Ryback exhaled a lengthy sigh, as his eyes sank, and he shook his head. The beads of sweat began to roll off his forehead, as he lifted the white service cap off his head, and stroked his hair back with his opposite hand â€" trying to assess the situation.

"Mr. Kryk." The Captain turned and called out to his nearby salarian comm officer. "What's the status on our communications?"

"No good, sir..." The salarian regretfully answered back. "I'm still trying to reestablish our link with Lycuna, but I can't break through whatever's scrambling our communications..."

"Keep trying." He ordered adamantly, before turning and taking a couple of steps towards the front of the bridge, and his turian helmsman.

"Mr. Davrik." Captain Ryback began, addressing a turian, who immediately shot out of his seat, turned and stood at attention. "How far are we from the nearest mass relay? Give me an ETA."

"Yes sir!" The disciplined turian acknowledged with a stoic salute, before quickly sitting back down and turning towards his large control console. He immediately went to work, punching in various keystrokes, and cuing up a multitude of read-outs, as a galaxy map appeared on his screen.

"ETA to the nearest mass relay... One hour, twelve minutes,

sir."

"Damn it, I was hoping it'd be sooner..." Ryback whispered to himself, through his teeth, with a damning shake of his head.

"...Alright." He continued with a sigh, looking back up at the turian. "Plot a course, Mr. Davrik... Make your destination the Citadel. Get us there."

"Aye-Aye, Captain!" Davrik saluted, and began to carry out the Captain's orders.

Captain Ryback nodded with a look of sheer, undaunted determination in his eyes, as he turned away from the forward controls, and once more approached the short human officer, who had moments ago rushed into the bridge in a huff.

"Franklin, you're coming with me." He asserted, as he straightened his officer's cap "pulling the black brim down snugly over his eyes, like someone preparing for a grisly undertaking. "You and I are gonna scour this ship. We're gonna find Commander Kim, figure out what's going on, and make sure these passengers stay safe."

"Yes sir. I'm with you, Captain" The small in stature Franklin concurred, as the two turned and headed towards the door.

"Well now, that seems unnecessary..." A brash voice suddenly announced, as the metallic door to the bridge unexpectedly slid open before them. "I'm right here..."

"Commander! Thank g..." Ryback's out pour of relief suddenly screeched to a halt, when he noticed the armed mercenaries in the one-eyed Security Commander's company.

Commander Andrew Kim, the Carmenta Illustria's head of security stood at the doorway, and slowly stepped in, with a devious, crooked grin on his face. He held a large, gleaming, silvery pistol tightly in his grip, pointed idly towards the ceiling. On his left, an asari in slightly battered light Blood Pack armor stepped in, brandishing a heavy machine-pistol, and keeping it aimed steadily at Captain Ryback's head. To Kim's right "a turian, wearing a reasonably heavier version of the same Blood Pack armor stepped in. He held a large assault rifle, primed and ready, as he aimed it back and forth at the various crew members on the bridge, allowing it to do the talking for him. Every crewman in the room immediately put their hands up, with their mouths agape, and a look of terror on their faces.

With his two mercenary subordinates keeping the crew under control, at gunpoint, Kargas casually strolled in, with his weapons still holstered, not seeing the need to draw them. And as soon as the doorway was cleared, Tarrik's stout little frame impudently marched in, with an arrogant demeanor and his head held high, as if he were some conquering warlord.

"Andrew...?" Captain Ryback began again, in a hushed tone, that reflected shock, disappointment, and disillusion. "It was you...?"

"Well, what can I say, Arthur?" Kim replied with a snide smile, and a sarcastic voice. "I'm an opportunist. And this opportunity was just too good to pass up."

A look of seething contempt overtook Ryback's expression. He clenched his fist, and his chest and brow tightened with anger, as he took a step towards the armed gunmen.

"Ah-Ah-Ah..." Kim said discouragingly, swiftly bringing his pistol down to target the Captain's head, halting him in his tracks. "I'd advise against any flashy bravery, Captain..." He continued, sarcastically tilting his head, with a conniving smile "You know what a 'loose cannon' I can be..."

Ryback clenched his teeth in a rage, nearly trembling with anger. "You... Despicable!"

"Alright, that's enough..." Tarrik asserted, interjecting with a hefty breath. "You two can pick this up later..."

Tarrik slowly stepped forward, towards the rest of the crew, and looked them over. Kim snickered mockingly, under his breath, and shook his head with a look of disdain at the sight of the miniscule volus vying to seize command.

A feeling of accomplishment swelled within the stout little figure, as he examined the crew members. Each of them still stood by their respective station's on the bridge, holding their hands up by their heads, with a frightened look in their eyes, especially at the intimidating presence of the armed mercenaries, and the herculean krogan before them.

"Listen up people!" Tarrik continued, attempting to project a commanding presence, accompanied by the sound of a heavy respirator. "You've all done a terrific job, but you're now officially relieved of duty... I'd like all of you to step away from your stations, and line up against this back wall with your hands on your heads..." He demanded, as he pointed to his left, towards the rear wall of the bridge. "Please note that my men's weapons are real, and so is their capacity to use them... If you do as you're told, no harm will come to you... But if anyone decides to try anything heroic, we will not hesitate to kill you, AND the person next to you... Have I made myself clear?"

"Pfft... Who's 'we'? I don't see him holding a gun..." Kim scoffed in a whisper, as he leaned towards Kargas, who simply shook his head, and rolled his eyes slightly.

The crew stood silent... They were too frightened to placate the volus with a verbal response, but after a very brief moment of contemplation, possibly considering any alternatives, they simply accepted Tarrik's terms, and nodded their heads submissively.

"Good..." Tarrik happily acknowledged. "Then please line up against the wall... Quickly now, don't doddle..." He waved them on, as the various members of the crew began to weave around their consoles, and move towards the back wall, with their hands locked behind their heads, while Teshya and Davix, the two armed mercenaries, kept their weapons primed for a little added incentive.

"Leahr...?" Tarrik called out, as he turned back towards his men, searching for the quarian. "Leahr'Haan!" He demanded again, angrily.

"...Yeah." A reserved voice acknowledged, as the burgundy veiled quarian stepped out from behind the burly krogan, with his head sunk between his shoulder. "I'm here, Tarrik..."

"Well, what are you waiting for...?" Tarrik questioned condescendingly, placing his stubby little arms on his hips, as Leahr stepped further into the bridge. "You've got work to do, my boy... Get to it."

Leahr was silent for a moment, as he tried to push down the queasiness settling into the pit of his stomach.

"Right..." He acknowledged in a hushed, sickened voice, as he moved towards the largest control console, at the fore of the bridge.

"What have I gotten myself into...?" He whispered to himself, as he reached the console, and set the portable terminal he carried under his left arm down â€" opening it, and powering it up.

As Leahr's computer came on, he had already begun masterfully working the console on the bridge, while at the same time keeping an eye on the omni-tool he had materialized over his right forearm. With an apparent knowledge of all things technical, he went back and forth from his portable terminal, to his omni-tool, to the bridge control console, seamlessly and adeptly. "Ancestors forgive me..." He said to himself, with a gulp, as he worked.

"...It'll take me a few minutes to upload my specialized VI and gain control of the ship." He announced with a shameful sigh. "After that, you can give your order..."

"Good." Kim affirmed with a devious grin, and an air of arrogance about him. "Then I better have my guys check in..." Just as the uniformed Commander raised his hand to his earpiece communicator, he was quickly interrupted.

"How can you do this, Andrew...?" The Captain beckoned, from his place along the back wall, with his hands locked behind head, the moment before Commander Kim's fingertips could press against his communicator. "How can you, of all people, be part of this? We fought together... Served the Alliance together...!"

Without moving an inch, Kim simply turned his head, and glared a burning look straight through the Captain.

"Fought together...?" He retorted with a seething gaze â€" finally breaking his statuesque stance, as he turned and slowly stepped up to Ryback. "Served the Alliance together...? No... YOU Served the Alliance, Arthur! I was exiled, remember...? Crucified... Cast out like an animal..."

"These people aren't soldiers, Andrew. They aren't to blame for what's been done to you...!" The Captain exclaimed, pleadingly. "They don't deserve this!"

"Shut up!" Kim demanded with a ferocious snarl, waving his gun dangerously close to Ryback's face. "I didn't deserve what I got either... The way I see it, this is just me taking back what the galaxy owes me, after putting me through a lifetime's worth of bullshit..."

Kim turned away from Ryback, giving his back to him, as if no longer able to face him. Without a sliver of remorse, pity, or hesitation on his face, he brought his hand up to his ear, and pressed a finger against his communicator.

"This is Commander Kim. Bridge is secure. All teams report in..."

* * *

><p>"Geronimo!" A human child excitedly exclaimed, as he charged into the pool, tucking his knees into his gut to execute the perfect canon ball.<p>

His friends, already afloat the water, laughed as they were splashed by his tiny tidal wave. All around the pool area, children and adults alike laughed, and played games. The brief scare from the dreadful impact they felt just moments ago had all but subsided. They'd bolt into the pool, from the twisting, towering water slide, only to rush out, and ascend it again. Those that weren't in the mood for a swim lounged nearby, in beach chairs "relaxing, and taking in the artificial rays, or perhaps grabbing a smoothie from the many nearby snack bars.

There couldn't be a more perfect portrait of a sunny day on a warm beach. Even if that portrait was merely an expensive simulation. Sunlight, generated by a massive glowing lamp. The clouds, and the trees "nothing more than a convincing projection. And the soothing sounds of the tide washing ashore, and the gentle breeze wafting by, simple ambiance from a speaker.

Still... It was as close as one could possibly get to the real thing, without actually being there. And two calculating brown eyes observed it all very, very closely. The two eyes of one of the Illustria's many security officers, standing guard over the Lido Deck, to ensure the security and protection of all the nearby passengers. Her presence was anything but ill-fitted.

"This is Starling." The black haired, brown eyed, female human officer announced, keeping a watchful eye, as she pressed two fingers to her ear. "Team Three ready on the Lido Deck..."

The low rumble of laughter could be heard spilling out into the hallway, as a decided figure patrolled through one of the ship's many grand atriums, past a nearby, on-board comedy club. Many stately dressed patrons breezed past him, coming, and going "most either oblivious, or uncaring about anything other than their own amusement. They held smiles on their faces, and delight in their hearts, as they browsed the shops, took in the shows, and floated around the clubs.

"Kyllek here..." The salarian security officer announced into his earpiece. "Team five standing by on the Empress Deck."

"Ohohoho Edmund! I haven't felt this spry since our honeymoon!" An elderly human woman chortled with youthful glee, as she and her congruently aged human husband stepped out of their staterooms, and walked down the hallway.

"And I haven't felt this nimble..." He said with a sly cunning in his voice, as a turian officer approached them from the opposite end of the hall. "Maybe after dinner we'll... head down to the spa for a soak."

"Edmund..." She replied, pretending to blush and trying to hide her beguiled fancy behind a facade of bashfulness. "You know I didn't bring a bathing suit..."

"Neither did I..." The slick old Casanova replied without missing a beat.

"Oh hush, you awful, awful man!" She admonished, giggling and playfully slapping his arm, as their paths crossed with the turian guard.

"Good evening, sir." The old woman politely greeted, with a refined bow, trying to contain her amusement.

"Good evening, madam!" The turian greeted with a perky cheerfulness. "I hope you're both enjoying your cruise experience."

"Oh, it's just wonderful..." The happy old woman replied, placing one hand over her chest, as she took a brief, loving glance at her husband.

"Terrific!" The officer affirmed, amicably. "Well, if there's anything I can do for you, please let me know... Enjoy the rest of your evening."

"Thank you."

The couple continued on, with their arms hooked, and their spirits lifted, as they turned a nearby corner and stepped out of sight. The turian's fraudulent smile quickly faded, and his cheerful demeanor turned to one of disgust, as he watched the old bats leave.

"Kastus reporting in..." He announced, with two fingers pressed to the side of his head. "Team four awaiting orders on the Riviera Deck."

The dice rolled, the cards were dealt, the cigars burned, and the casino lights danced in the eyes of the gaming patrons. It was all back to normal on this provocative pleasure cruise, as the champagne continued to flow. All back to normal, except for one very elite group of individuals, who stood near the center of the casino with wary, almost worried expressions on their faces. Two humans, a salarian, a krogan, a geth, and a turian who knew they could smell trouble in the air, amidst the cigar smoke, but they just couldn't distinguish it. Perhaps they would soon notice the security officers exchanging errant glances, as they patrolled the room.

"This is To'ril on the Promenade Deck." A voice informed, within Shepard's ear, as he and the finely dressed Tali rapidly descended a long, nondescript stairwell. "Team one in position and awaiting go

ahead."

"Damn!" Shepard exclaimed angrily, halting his descent, after listening in. He was still dressed as if he was attending a wedding, but instead of holding a wedding gift, he clutched a pistol in his grip. The same pistol he'd commandeered from the unsuspecting Officer Strenners.

"What is it?" Tali questioned, after Shepard's disheartening outburst.

"They're already on the bridge..." He replied, staring off into space, as he continued to listen in. "And the team leads are checking in all over the ship... I was hoping we had a bit more time. They'll be given the order to take the ship any minute..."

John stopped, and took a slow look around the hollow feeling stairwell, making a quick assessment.

"We have to hurry..." Tali began, obviously drawing the same conclusion that John was coming to. "If they're planning on gathering everyone up into a single deck, like the guard said, they'll most likely be taking them through the stairwells..."

"Exactly what I was thinking..." He affirmed, as they both continued to descend the steps. They reached a door labeled 'Riviera Deck', and continued on past it.

"What deck was our stateroom on?" He queried, as they continued on, with a rapid pace.

"The Vista Deck." Tali answered, as they reached another door labeled 'Verandah Deck', only to pass it by. "Should only be one or two more floors down."

"...Are we gonna try to meet up with the others?" She asked, finding herself with the awkward problem of needing to hold her dress up at her thigh, so as to avoid stepping on it, as they rushed forth. A most unusual dilemma for a quarian.

"No." Shepard affirmed, pointedly. "As much as I'd like to, I doubt they know what's going on, and we can't let ourselves get caught with everyone else..." He elaborated, as they breezed past another floor. "Strenners said they were planning to rob everyone, not kill them. So, we have to be stealthy about this. There's too many civilians on-board who could get hurt if we tried anything out in the open. Besides, the others can handle themselves. We just gotta make sure we get that message out."

As they neared the bottom of the current flight of stairs, their steps slowed as they read the sign by the door.

"Vista Deck, this is it..." John announced, as he readied his pistol, and approached the door.

He pressed his back against the wall beside the doorway, holding the sidearm primed and pointed up towards the ceiling, with Tali taking the same position on the opposite side. With his other hand, John slowly reached out towards the door's green holographic panel,

activating it, and ushering it to slide open with a quiet swish. He cautiously and discreetly move his head to the edge of the entry way, peering out to make sure it was safe.

The door opened up into a very short, narrow hallway, tucked away into one of the corners of the far reaching deck. John and Tali both stepped cautiously out, after spotting no immediate presence in the vicinity, and quickly scanned the area. To their left was a locked door, indicated by the red holographic panel covering it " and it was marked with a sign displaying an image of a dustpan and a broom. To the right, the narrow corridor opened up and intersected with the deck's main hallway, which was lined on both sides with the doors to the extravagant Deluxe Grand Suite Staterooms. Divided in half by intermittent pillars of ivory and gold, the corridor spanned virtually the entire length of the deck, from stern to bow. And at both ends of the luxurious hallway, sat the decks main elevators.

Shepard moved to the edge of the narrow, tucked away passage, pressed himself against the wall, and carefully poked his head out, to peer around the corner into the main hallway. There was still a moderate amount of foot traffic from the unsuspecting passengers, as they came and went from their staterooms " completely unaware of anything about to befall them. But the Commander's attention immediately fixated on the three uniformed officers patrolling the area in the distance " nothing out of the ordinary to anyone else.

"There's a few guards on patrol..." He announced to Tali, in a low voice that wasn't quite a whisper, as he pulled his head back, and turned to her. "We gotta find somewhere to lay low. Stay outta sight until they clear the decks..."

"Would that work...?" Tali asked, pointing a thumb over her shoulder, to the locked door behind her, with her other hand on her hip.

John tilted his head, and peered around Tali, as she turned to the side, granting him a better view. "Yeah, that should do." He assured, with a nonchalant shrug of his shoulders. "Can you get it open?"

"John... It's a janitor's closet." Tali retorted, with a mild sarcasm in her voice, as she turned around and walked a short distance to the door. "I could probably get it open with a piece of string..."

"Hmph..." Shepard smiled, and chuckled under his breath, shaking his head, as Tali went to work. She quickly brought up her omni-tool, pressed in a few rapid keys, and swiped it in front of the door's holographic panel. Just like that, the dissuading red light switched to an inviting green, and the door slid open.

Tali turned back to John, tilting her head, and crossing her arms with an arrogant stance. "What is it you humans say?" She began again, as she extended a hand towards the door, showing it off in the same way a model might show off a sports car in a showroom. "Ta da...?"

"Forgive me for ever having doubted you..." Shepard concede with a playful sarcasm.

They both stepped up to the newly opened door, and took a peek inside the tiny room. And tiny was all it was. There was barely enough room for one person to stand, let alone do anything else. There was an old mop, sticking out of a large bucket. A small, VI operated vacuum cleaner, which looked to be in slight disrepair, and shelves along the inside walls, each housing a plethora of cleaning agents and utensils.

"Oi... This cruise just gets better and better..." Tali muttered under her breath, with a shake of her head, as she sighed and stepped in.

"Oh yeah..." Shepard concurred, in a voice drained of exuberance, as he followed her in. "I guess a relaxing vacation, after stopping an army of ancient space monsters, was just a little too much to ask..."

* * *

><p>Leahr'Haan worked with a dexterous fervor, as he manipulated the large control console at the head of the bridge. At a moment's notice, he'd switch to his own portable terminal, adeptly punch in a rapid set of keys, then turn back to the main console. He seemed nervous as he worked, but it didn't appear to be affecting his concentration. If anything, he thrived off the tension, like a true quarian mechanist.<p>

"What's the hold up, quarian?" Kargas' creaky voice bellowed, crossing his arms, as he came to stand behind Leahr.

"...I have a name, you know." The veiled machinist muttered, just loud enough to make himself feel daring, yet secretly hoping his remark would go unheard... Or ignored.

"No hold up..." He finally announced out-loud, as his keystrokes grew faster. Suddenly, with the adamant punch of one final key, he stopped, and laid his hands down on the edge of the console, while subtly shaking his head. "There..." He said, grievously. "It's done..."

"You're finished...?!" Tarrik questioned â€" his voice coinciding with a heavy breath, and brimming with awe and anticipation, as he stepped up to the front of the bridge, coming to stand beside the towering Kargas.

"Yes..." Leahr acknowledged with a drawn out sigh, as he slouched down in his seat, and draped one hand over his helmet, covering his eyes. "I've overwritten all emergency protocols..." He began to explain, causing Tarrik's eyes to light up with delight behind his suit, matching the artificial glow already radiating from his suit's optic visors. "My VI has taken control of most of the ship's primary systems... Radar, navigation, communication, surveillance... Everything important... You'll still need a skeleton crew in engineering to monitor vital systems, but you can pretty much run the entire ship from this console... And I've locked down all the life pods, escape shuttles, and emergency hatches like you asked... There's no way for anyone to get off this ship..."

Tarrik was overtaken by silence, as he took a moment of revelry, before speaking up again.

"Leahr, my boy...!" He began, with a newfound glee in his voice, nearly singing, behind the hiss of his heavy breath. "You never disappoint me!"

"Whatever you say, Tarrik... But I'm done." Leahr decisively affirmed, as he sat back up in his seat, and swiveled around in it. "You've got your mechs, you've got your overrides, and you've got control of the ship... I've fulfilled my end of the bargain. So as soon as we reach the Terminus, I'll take my share and be on my way... I want nothing more to do with this..."

"You're done when we say you're done, pyjack." Kargas disdainfully admonished. "You'll get your credits. But in the meantime, if we need you to do something, you're gonna do it... So I suggest you settle in."

Leahr didn't respond... He just sat silently, bowing his head, and looking away as an unforgiving weight bore down on his shoulders. But what could he do? He was in far, far too deep now... Sinking... Drowning... But soon, it would all be over. He'd have his money, and he'd return to his people a champion... A hero...! The wonderful gifts he'd be able to bring back with him to the Flotilla would be hailed by all quarians, everywhere. Oh, what a difference his endowment could make...! But they'd never know what he had to do to get it. They could never find out... And he'd never look back on it. All this would just be a bad memory, that in time, would surely fade, and go away...

Commander Kim had returned his sidearm to his hip, as he kept his one good eye on the members of the bridge crew, lined up, facing the back wall, with their hands on their heads. Teshya kept her machine pistol, and Davix, his assault rifle, attentively aimed at their backs, as they watched for the slightest flinch or sign of insurrection.

"Commander..." Tarrik's voice announced, with the hiss of his breath, garnering Kim's attention, and coaxing him to turn around and look down at the pudgy little creature. "Leahr has control of the ship. You may give the order when ready..."

As the information reached his ears, the corners of Kim's lips immediately began to curl upward.

"Don't do this, Andrew!" Captain Ryback pleaded one last time, with his forehead pressed against the cold steel wall.

"Sorry Artie..." The Commander shot back, paying no heed, as he raised his hand to his ear.

"Kim to all teams." He announced, as his brow furrowed. Before he continued, a twisted smile grew on his face, and an angry, sadistic gleam overtook his eyes. It was the look of a starved predator, that just zeroed in on its prey...

"Take it."

* * *

><p>The Illustria's impressive FTL Drive Core hummed and whirred with

life, as it sat idly in the engine room, waiting for incitement. It wasn't like the gleaming, silvery Tantalus Drive Core on-board the Normandy, though it was probably every bit as powerful. The Illustria's FTL drive was comprised of two tremendous, vertical cylinders, each standing an impressive thirty, to forty feet in height. Both were marked with vertical stripes of brilliant blue light, radiating from the inner workings of the apparatus. And they continued to speak with a soft murmur, as multiple engineers worked frantically around them â€" traversing the narrow catwalks and platforms that surrounded the drive core, in a complete stupor.<p>

"Hey Kryllis, what the hell's going on?" A turian in a dark blue work uniform demanded to know, as he walked over to a salarian co-worker, pounding and laboring over his control console in a befuddled state. "My station just went dark."

"I know, I know! Mine too!" The salarian engineer snapped back, as he pounded his closed fist down onto his controls in alarm, as if hoping to some how elicit some sort of response. He shook his head, as he turned around, and walked a short distance across the catwalk, to a terminal on the opposite side. Again, all he managed to do was prod at dark, inert buttons, exacerbating his distress.

"Damn!" He exclaimed, as he just gave up all together. "Nothing... It's like something just rerouted engine control..." With a worried sigh and a shake of his head, he turned and looked up at the turian. "Any luck contacting the bridge?"

"No. The radio's still out..." The turian informed, bowing his head, with a subtle shake, as an increasing nervousness shone in his eyes. "What's going on, Kryllis? What the hell was that impact...?"

"I dunno..." He uttered, in a hushed, panic-struck voice, as he turned to look up at the drive core, and the other engineers working around it â€" taking scans and readings with their omni-tools.

"Hey!" He yelled out, earning their attention. "What's the status on the engines?"

"Anti-proton thrusters are working fine. So is the drive core!" A human engineer yelled back â€" his voice echoing loudly off the metallic walls of the large room. "All readings are optimal. There's no loss of functionality. We're just completely locked out of the system..."

"...Damn. Just as I thought." Kryllis whispered, just loud enough that his nearby turian co-worker could hear. "Something's going on..."

"What do you think it is?"

"I dunno..." He replied, swallowing back a gulp. "Go lock the doors, and keep trying the radio." The salarian instructed, as he lowered himself down to the steel grate floor, maneuvering his upper-body under the console, like a mechanic sliding under a car. "I'll keep trying to regain control of the engines."

"Right!" His turian co-worker acknowledged, without hesitation. He

quickly bolted down the length of the walkway, and turned a corner, down a ramp, that led to the lower level, and the engine's room main entrance. As he neared the door, it suddenly slid open with a swish, causing his sprint to slow to a jog, when he saw who stood at the entrance.

"...Hey." He began, exhibiting a mixture of surprise and relief, both in his voice, and on his expression, as he watched the four armed guards step in " A drell, a pair of turians, and a human woman.

"It's about time you guys showed up..." The turian engineer expressed, starting to show signs of a grin, as he came to a stop a few feet in front of them. "What the hell's going on out there? We've got no radio communications, and we've lost control of the engines..."

His proclamations fell on deaf ears, as the woman at the head of the armed security troop stepped forward, past the turian.

"Hey! I'm talking t..."

"Alright, listen up!" She demanded, shouting out at top volume, cutting the turian off, and causing every worker on the engineering deck platforms to stop what they were doing, and give her their full attention. "I want everyone but the two highest ranking engineers cleared outta here! Engine room's closed!"

"Cleared out...?! " The turian engineer beckoned, with a dismally confused look on his face. "We can't clear out, we've got-"

He was suddenly cut off by the mechanical buzz of a pistol extending, as it was drawn and pressed against the his head, ushering a collective gasp, and backwards reel from the other workers.

"That wasn't a request." She harshly berated, holding her sidearm's barrel firmly against the bridge of the turian's nose, as her abetting security guards drew their weapons, and aimed them up at the others.

"...Oh! By the spirits! W-Wh-What are you doing?!"

"If we have to go up there to drag you people down-" She continued, yelling out at the other workers, but keeping her cold, emotionless gaze focused on the turian. "-someone is going to die... MOVE IT!"

Her enraged outburst sent a simultaneous shudder down the spines of the other workers, as they trembled, put their hands up, and began making their way down.

"Move it! Lets go! Come on, you think we're joking?!" The drell accomplice barked, keeping his weapon drawn on the engineers " shoving them along, as they descended the ramp, with their hands up. "Single file! Eyes on the man in front of you! Nobody tries anything, nobody has to die!"

* * *

><p>Meanwhile, a black haired little boy, no more than nine or ten

years of age, pouted and groaned, with his arms crossed, and a little wrinkled sneer on his face, as he followed his parents along, down a hallway lined with stateroom doors, on the Vista Deck. His parents, a human couple, in their late thirties to early forties, were cordially dressed, in fine evening attire, no doubt for a pleasant night together as a family. The gentlemen were both donned in matching, dark gray dinner suits. And the lady was adorned with a silky, dark green ensemble, complete with matching pumps, and shoulder wrap. The little gentleman however, didn't appear too happy with what his parents undoubtedly selected for him " awkwardly fidgeting and tugging at his clothes, as he continued along, complaining the whole way.<p>

"But dad, I don't wanna go to the stupid dancing place!" He griped and bellowed, as he followed along. "I wanna go on the water slides!"

As per the norm, passengers came and went around them. Some were retreating to their staterooms after a full day of self-indulgent delights " possibly to get a good night's sleep, and get ready for whatever excitement tomorrow may offer. While others, much like this family, were just now preparing to embark on another day of luxury entertainment.

A few security officers were stationed within the vicinity - no doubt keeping the peace. They patrolled back and forth, keeping out a discerning eye, and holding a deceitful smile on their faces. One officer in particular, a salarman, was at the north end of the main corridor " working a small, holographic control panel on the wall, located beneath a sign etched in red lettering that read: EMERGENCY LOCK OVERRIDE " AUTHORIZED USE ONLY.

"Matty, sweetie... You've already been on the water slides..." The boy's mother reproached, while applying the final touches to her ultra-glossy, cerise lipstick, as they continued on through the hallway.

"I don't care! I wanna go again!" Matty demanded, stopping dead in his tracks, with the angry stomp of one foot on the ground.

"Alright Mathew, now that's enough!" His father sternly admonished, as he turned around, and hunkered down before his son. "We all agreed this was going to be a FAMILY vacation. Since we've been here, all we've done is everything you wanted to do. The shows, the water park, the mini-golf, the... the Kid's Quadrant thing..." He explained, as he counted the activities off on his fingers. "You've gotten your way enough. Tonight, your mother and I wanna do something we'll enjoy."

"Now come on." He insisted, as he stood back up, and wrapped his arm around his wife. "Stop being a bad boy. And apologize to your mother."

The frowny faced little boy just stood there for a moment, not saying a word. And then it came...

"No!" He refuted in a scream, before turning with a jerk, and marching away in a huff. "I'm going back to the room, I don't wanna go with you!"

"Oh, Matty, sweetheart...!" His mother beseeched, with a sorrowful tone "melting like butter, as she reached her hand out, and tried to follow the child, before being stopped by her husband.

"No, no. Let him Angela..." He demanded, with a look of anger and disappointment on his face, keeping a close eye on his son, as he watched him walk a short distance away. "He can't unlock the door. He has to come back. And when he does..."

"Oh, Alex..." His wife responded, with a pleading voice, and anguished eyes. "Maybe we should just go to the Lido Deck tonight? We can go dancing some other time..."

"No!" He sternly, and immediately refuted. "No. Absolutely not. How's he ever gonna learn that he can't always get what he wants if you give into him every time he throws a fit...?!"

Little Mathew marched on towards their stateroom's door, in a self righteous huff. All the while, the salarian security officer at the North end of the corridor continued his work on the small control panel. Suddenly, a tiny little light on the control pad switched from red to green. As if saying "No turning back now..." with his breath, the salarian closed his eyes, exhaled a long, deep, breath, and moved his finger to input one final key.

Mathew reached his little hand up, towards the door's holographic panel, as his parents stood by, watching in disappointment, a few feet away. At that moment, just before Mathew could even reach the door's panel, it shot open with a swish. The strange thing was, so did every single other door on the deck.

"What the hell...?" Alex muttered, with a confused look on his face, as he and Angela stood in the middle of the hallway, looking around at the gaping entry ways of every single opened door. From their vantage point, they had a clear view of two Stateroom interiors, directly on either side of them.

"Everyone out!" The shriek of a shrill voice tore through the air, as the guards standing post suddenly drew their weapons, and began waving them around menacingly. "Out of your rooms! Now! Move!"

A chorus of screams began to flood the deck, as panic and chaos ensued. Many passengers awoke from their sleep in a daze, hearing the calamity outside, as guards began barging into their rooms "dragging them out of their beds, and onto the floors, holding guns to their faces. Others were in the middle of getting dressed, or simply relaxing. Some were even caught in the throes of passion, as the vicious siege began, and all hell broke loose.

"Shut up! Get the fuck out here!" The aggressor's voices demanded, carrying over the screams, and shrieks of terror, as chaos spilled out into the hallway. People scrambled to get away, trying to get to the elevators, or anywhere that would provide safe haven, but they found this impossible, as every exit was carefully guarded by a gun toting uniformed assailant.

"Alex! Oh my god, what's going on?! Where's Matty?!" Angela cried out, in terror, as she looked around at the flooding crowd trampling the hallway, savagely being herded into the stairwells.

"I... I-I don't know!" Alex shouted, consumed by an equal panic, as he sifted through the crowd with his eyes, hoping to spot some sign of his little boy. "Come on, stay close!" He demanded, as he took her hand tightly, and began to weave through the flood. "Mathew...! Mathew! Where are you son?! MATHEW!"

"Mom!" Matty cried out, scared and confused, as he looked around nearly getting trampled with every step he took, by the scurrying crowd. He couldn't make out any faces, it was just a sea of hips and legs brushing, and pushing past him, as his frantic search persisted. "Mom! Dad! Where are you?!" He continued to beseech, as tears began to drip from his eyes. Suddenly, he felt himself bump into something.

"Hey!" An angry, female voice bellowed over the clamor, as Mathew gasped and looked up at the asari in uniform standing before him, holding a gun. "Come 'ere you little brat!" She demanded, as she bent down, and reached for the child.

Without a second thought, a moment before the armed asari could grab him, Mathew turned, and bolted in the other direction, nimbly dodging, and squeezing his way through the crowd.

"Hey!" The asari officer shouted, as she took off after him. She plowed her way through passing patrons, as she gave chase, trying to keep up. But the child's agile little frame, and quick little legs proved too elusive for the asari, as she quickly lost sight of him within the stream of lifeforms.

"Bah..." She griped, and waved her hand dismissively, as she turned around, and continued her task of keeping the rabble in line, and moving.

"Mathew!" "Matty, sweetheart! Where are you?!" Angela and Alex continued to call out, as they fought against the current of aliens and humanity being herded in the opposite direction.

"Hey!" A turian guard suddenly appeared out of the crowd, and halted them in place, with his gun aimed at Alex's chest. "Turn around! Other way!"

"No! I'm looking for my son!" Alex dauntlessly affirmed, showing no fear of neither the weapon, nor the man wielding it.

"I don't care, I said move it!"

"Fuck you!" The brave parent shouted in an outrage, as he lunged forward, and took hold of the turian's armed appendage, torquing it up towards the ceiling.

"Alex!" Angela screamed in terror, as she watched her husband suddenly engaged in a struggle for his life, against the turian security officer.

"Get off me mother fucker!" The guard shouted angrily, as they wrestled over control of the firearm.

Mustering up every last ounce of force he could, Alex swung the turian against the wall, pinning him against it, back first. Poom! Poom! Poom! The loud thuds resounded throughout the hall, as Alex

attempted to slam the gun against the wall, and out of the turian's grip.

In the bedlam of the violent takeover, most passer-byes didn't seem to notice the brawling men, as they were being ruthlessly, and systematically herded out of their rooms, and down the hall, like lambs being led to slaughter. But the altercation didn't go unnoticed by everyone...

"Argh! Umph! Agh!" Alex groaned and coughed, as the turian began pummeling his gut with hard, repeated jabs, from his opposite hand. Just then, Angela lunged forward, and grabbed the turian's arm - holding it back, in a desperate attempt to help her husband. Unfortunately, neither of them saw the salarian officer rapidly approaching the scene of the commotion.

"Hey!" The salarian shouted out, as he slammed the butt of his sidearm down hard on the back of Alex's head, immediately causing him to collapse down to the floor, with a thud.

"Bitch!" The formerly restrained turian snarled with anger, as he coiled his arm back, and careened a brutal back hand into Angela's face, slamming her down to the floor.

"You two are gonna wish you hadn't done that..." He continued, pulling the slide back on his pistol to cock it.

With an infuriated gleam in his eyes, he lowered his arm, and took aim at the human male writhing around on the floor, in a daze, clutching at the back of his head, with his eyes clenched tightly.

"No!" Angela pleaded - exhibiting a rapidly swelling, red contusion on her cheek, as she crawled over to her husband, and threw herself onto him. "No, please... Don't!" She begged, with tears in her eyes, as she held a hand up to the turian.

"Angie no... Ge... Get away...!" Alex pleaded in a faint, groggy voice - barely clinging to consciousness, with blurred vision, as he tried to push her out of harm's way.

Without showing the slightest symptoms of hesitation, the turian simply shrugged a bit, undeterred, as he began to pull back on the trigger, with the human woman's head now squarely in his sights.

"I wouldn't..." The salarian calmly interjected, moments before the turian could fire, causing him to look up at his slender accomplice. "Commander Kim said not to kill anyone unless we really had to... They could be valuable. And they're not worth anything if they're dead..."

A look of indignant anger began seething on the turian's face, as he clenched his teeth, shook his head, furrowed his brow, and swallowed back his pride. "...Fine." He complied, reluctantly withdrawing his weapon from the couple on the floor.

"Get up. Both of you! On your feet!" The salarian then demanded, as the turian turned, and continued waving the frantic crowd along.

Angela, now possessing a flushed, red, throbbing welt on her right cheek where she had been struck, slowly stood up, holding onto Alex's arm, and helping him stagger to his feet.

"No... Mathew..." Alex began again, in a pained, throaty voice, as he looked up at the salarian. "My... My son. Where's my son?!"

"Look, everyone's going to the same place..." The salarian replied, with a somewhat angered tone, despite keeping a composed demeanor. "Your clutch is probably already gone with everyone else... So I suggest you get moving. Don't make us have to kill you..."

The boy's father didn't say anything. He simply stood there, holding the back of his head, and glaring a hateful hole through the uniformed 'keeper of the peace', as his upper lip twitched, either from pain, or anger...

"Alex...!" His wife beckoned, tugging at his arm, trying snap him out of his angry trance, before inciting more hostility. "Alex, come on...! We have to do as they say... He said Matty's probably already gone down with the others. We have to go find him...!"

As he listened to Angela, his face suddenly softened. It melted from an expression of indignant anger, and rage, to a look of fear and uncertainty, as he turned to his wife, and took her hand. It wasn't fear for his own well being, but for his family's... The hallway now was nearly vacated. Most of the passengers had been dragged from their rooms screaming, and forced into the stairwells "going down to god knows where. As Alex held onto the back of his head with his left hand, and clutched his wife's hand tightly with his right, he took one last look around the nearly empty corridor, hoping by some miracle he would spot his little boy. Sadly, he would not... Now, he could only pray, that where ever they'd end up, they would be together, as they were both shoved from behind, by a human guard, into the stairwell...

"Hmph..." The human officer chuckled, and snickered, all at once, as the last of the crowd was forced into the stairs. Like a herd of stampeding cattle, the thundering clamor of their footsteps could be heard rapidly descending, as the echoing voices of his fellow guards continued to bark orders at them.

The human guard took a brief look around the mostly empty hallway, spotting a few of his uniformed accomplices individually checking each of the rooms to assure there were no hiding stragglers. Just then, as his head continued to pan across the area, he noticed something out of the left corner of his eye.

"I don't remember that being unlocked..." He muttered to himself dubiously, as he spotted what was likely a utility closet, as indicated by the sign painted on the door, marked with a dustpan and a broom. The door was also marked with an inviting green panel "one which should've been red.

With his handgun drawn, the traitorous officer tentatively moved towards the door. The grip around his pistol tightened, as he approached - expecting to find some frightened stray passengers, or perhaps a cowardly custodian hoping to weather the siege. With his weapon steadily primed, he slowly reached out to the door's panel, and activated it...

"Ah-Ha!" He shouted triumphantly, as the door flew open with a swish. He quickly brought his armed hand forward, and aimed his pistol around within the small, dimly lit room. How foolish he felt, when he realized it was empty... There was nothing in this tiny room, but a dingy mop sticking out of a grimy bucket. A beat up, old, VI vacuum cleaner, and shelves of used cleaning supplies. With a furrowed brow, the guard raised his omni-tool, and shined his flashlight into the dim closet for good measure. Nothing...

"Hmm..." He muttered pensively, giving the room a long look around, as something didn't quite sit right with him. But, without giving the notion a further thought, he simply switched off his light, and sealed the door, leaving the clearly empty room behind, choked in darkness...

* * *

><p>Carmenta Illustria... The grand, auspicious words seemed to almost jump right off of the gleaming, silvery hull they were painted on, as it floated listlessly in space. The name itself rang with elegance, luxury, and grandeur. Like the name of some ancient, exotic goddess whispered, for all eternity, by the cosmos themselves... Carmenta Illustria.<p>

Though her name may be whispered... Inside, her passengers were screaming...

Chaos broke out, and began to spill into every hallway, every corridor, of the luxurious cruise ship, as its frightened passengers were abruptly, and violently torn from their leisurely activities at gun point.

"You think I'm joking?! Get moving!"

"Lets go! You wanna die?! Get your asses up!"

"Form up! Straight line! Now!"

"Shut the fuck up and get moving!"

"Out of the fucking pool! Right now! Go, Move it!"

"Hands up! On your head! Let's go!"

The vile, shrieking voices of the aggressors shuddered the cowering flock, as they were methodically being driven into the stairwells of every deck. They were dragged out of their beds, and out of the pools... Driven out of restaurants, bars, and comedy clubs... Forced out of the concert halls, and the spas in droves... For any on-board, it was a nightmare, brought on as abruptly as a fatal head-on collision... Moments ago, they were relaxing, and unwinding, enjoying champagne, and caviar, and having the times of their lives... Now they were RUNNING for their lives...

"Why are you doing this?!" Some would ask, pleading with their eyes. But the pleas were met with an angry shove, followed by a gun pointed in their face, ordering them to move along. There was no marked sign of hesitation or remorse for what they were doing to these people, as they wantonly betrayed the badges pinned on their

uniforms.

Passengers scurried about, in a panicked stupor, like ants in an unearthed dirt mound. The stairways became overwhelmed with life, as they were funneled in like cattle. And despite the guards' constant, continuous demands for single file, and orderly fashion... It was bedlam. Father's and mothers had to carry their children in their arms, and on their backs to prevent them from getting trampled. And any that fought back, were met with unforgiving force...

"I said get your humpty-dumpty ass moving, elcor!" A male human guard ordered, in center of one of the Illustria's shopping centers, as an angered elcor shopkeeper refused to budge, while the panicked rabble flooded out of the area around them.

"Infuriatedly: No." The massive quadruped replied, firmly standing his ground, in what could only be described as an elcor version of a stand off.

"Look, I'm not gonna tell your hippo ass again! I said movâ€"Hey, whoa!"

POW! The demanding guard was suddenly cut off, as he narrowly sidestepped a powerful, but slow swing from one of the elcor's tree trunk like arms, causing it to slam against nothing but the carpet - leaving a small crater where it dented the metallic floor underneath.

"Alright, that does it!" The baleful officer shouted, as the elcor slothfully tried to reposition himself for another attack. Before he could, the guard materialized his omni-tool, and with a lightning fast motion, he changed the holographic ring that surrounded his hand from an orange, to a bright blue. It emitted a loud, electrical buzz, and began arching volts of energy, as he swiftly jabbed into the elcor's side.

"Uaaghghhhh!" Even the elcor can make a bellowing exclamation of agony, when they've got an omni-taser jammed into their gut. The lumbering, ox-like frame of the massive elcor began to writhe, and spasm violently â€" his every muscle tightened from the crippling pain, as the guard continued to hold the incapacitating omni-tool at his side for a good five seconds, before finally pulling his arm back.

With one final, violent convulsion, the elcor's powerful limbs gave out, and he collapsed onto the floor with a resounding thud, like a horse collapsing from exhaustion â€" moaning in pain, and panting heavily.

The guard bit down on his lower lip, and shook his head, as he looked down at the squirming behemoth. With a sigh, he raised his hand to his ear, and pressed against his communicator. "This is Arden, team four on the Galleria Deck... I'm gonna need some biotics down here to move a big, pain in the ass load..."

9. Chapter 9: The Taking Part II

Salvation: Episode I â€" The Taking of the Carmenta Illustria

Disclaimer: This fan-fiction is part of an episodic series taking place after Salvation: A Half-Life/Mass Effect Universe Fan Fiction, which will lead directly to its sequel, Salvation II: Project Prometheus. These episodes and sequel take place OUTSIDE of the Mass Effect 3 continuity. Characters property of their respective companies, Half-Life created by Valve and Mass Effect created by Bioware.

****Chapter 9: The Taking (Part II)****

****We've Got Hostiles!****

"Okay then... If you're the real Gordon Freeman, why don't you appear to have aged at all?!" Cameron McClane, the ever eager, blonde haired journalist, in a sky blue dress, did her best to shout over the music, as she held her omni-tool up to Gordon.

She, Gordon, and Miranda still sat, dressed for a gala event, at the counter of the dimly lit Medley Bar, tucked far into the back corner of the Nirasha Lounge. Gordon sat on the stool between the two ladies, sipping on his drink, with a bit of a flustered look on his face, as the reporter bombarded him with a fusillade of bothersome questions. He ignored them for the most part, placating her with only very simple, brief answers, as he and Miranda carried on their own, separate conversation.

The rest of the club had returned to its former life and energy. The room was mired in darkness, illuminated only by the bright, colorful, pulsating stage lights, and the vivid, abstract, dancing imagery projected onto the ceiling. Loud, rhythmic music blared, as people moved to the beat, and danced their cares away, having all but forgotten the strange impact they felt minutes ago.

None of them could hear the screams emanating from the hallways outside, nor did they notice the multiple security officers stationed all around the club, that began to draw their weapons in the dark.

"I told you, I was in some sort of suspended animation!" Gordon shouted back a quick answer, over the music. "Listen, can't we do this anoth..."

POW! POW! POW! The explosive, and all too familiar, thunder of gunfire suddenly erupted in the room, booming even louder than the music, as three shots were fired into the air, from the middle of the Nirasha lounge, striking the psychedelic ceiling.

"Party's over! Shut off the fucking music!" The asari guard, holding the smoking gun, shouted, as pandemonium broke out. "Everyone clear outta here. Now! Move it!"

Gordon, Miranda, and Cameron turned away from the bar, and looked on in disbelief, as the clamorous crowd scurried towards the exits in violent disarray - being forced along by the multiplicity of armed security personnel.

"Oh my god... Wh-what's going on?!" Cameron begged aloud, somewhat hiding herself behind Gordon, as if hoping he could make it all go away.

"Oh, you can't be serious..." He muttered to himself with a sigh, drawing his head all the way back, and letting his arms hang loosely at his sides - showing the guise of someone who simply received an annoying bit news, like having to come into work on a Saturday.

"It seems we have a problem..." Miranda affirmed, keeping a calm, and stoic demeanor, despite the worried feeling that washed over her, as she turned and looked at Gordon. Gordon simply nodded wearily, in response.

The grand dance club was left shrouded in darkness, even though the music had stopped. The artists on the stage had fled, now joining rest of the panicked masses - flooding the exit like bees out of a disturbed hive.

"Hey!" An irate voice shouted, as a lone salarion guard entered the bar area in the back, keeping his gun drawn on the civilians. "All of you, clear outta here, NOW!" He ordered, as he walked with a wide stride, along the left wall of the bar, keeping his weapon primed.

"O-Okay, man... Don't shoot. We're moving. We're moving!" The human bartender behind the bar assured, with a trembling voice, as he put his shaking hands up, and he and his fellow bartenders rushed out from behind the counter.

"That's it, nice and quite now..." The salarion officer said, pleased, as the employees headed out obediently. Just then he looked towards the three standing near the bar stools, in front of the counter, that hadn't budged. One of which was simply cowering behind the two bolstered figures in front of her.

"Hey! You three! I said move it! Come on, let's go!" He ordered, as he stepped towards Gordon, with his gun firmly aimed at his chest. To the salarion's surprise, this tactic that would've easily intimidated most others into submission, seemed to have no effect on the man before him.

"What are you, deaf?!" He continued to shout, as Miranda brought her hands up beside Gordon, clenching them into fists. "Get your asses mov-Hey! Hey! Hey!" He abruptly exclaimed, immediately turning his pistol on Miranda, as her hands became engulfed in a blue biotic flame. "Don't even think ab..." WHACK!

With cheetah-like quickness, Gordon seized the opportunity while the guard was distracted by Miranda's biotics, to grab the bar stool standing near his leg, slamming it against the guard's hand like a baseball bat, causing the handgun to go flying out of his grip, and sliding across the floor into the shadows of the dimly lit club.

"AH-AAAH!" The officer screamed, reeling backwards in pain and shock, and cradling his now throbbing, possibly broken hand, beneath his opposite arm. "You bastard!"

"What's going on?!" Gordon demanded sternly, following the back pedaling salarion, with the bar stool brandished tightly in his grip, like a gladiator wielding a battleaxe. "Why are you doing this? Where are you taking everyone?!"

"Ahh-uhh...! To hell with you!" He affronted, with a hateful hiss, before bringing his uninjured hand up to his ear. "Help! Help! I need back-" WHAM!

No sooner had the salarian pressed against his communicator, than Gordon plowed the thick, steel legs of the stool against the side of his head, sending him crashing to the floor, back first, with unrelenting force, and a blood curdling thud.

"Ooh..." Miranda said, feigning a fraudulent cringe, as she stepped up beside Gordon, looking down at the incapacitated, and probably seriously injured salarian security guard. "That looked like it hurt..."

"Oh god...!" Cameron cried out, in a muffled exclamation, holding her trembling hands over her mouth, as she too came to stand around the downed officer. "Is... Is he dead...?!"

"Doubtful..." Gordon expressed, as he examined the newly mangled bar stool in his hands, before tossing it aside. "But it looks like you've got your story, Miss McClane..."

"B-But these are security guards...!" She rebutted, in a voice choked back by denial. "Why would they do this?"

"Beats me..." Gordon muttered, as he and Miranda both turned, and looked out towards the center of the Nirasha Lounge.

Passengers were still being corralled out, chaotically. And multiple guards could still be seen in the distance â€" shoving people along, and waving their weapons brutishly in their faces. But the uproar of the screaming masses, and the darkness of the club was enough to keep them from drawing any more attention, at least momentarily.

"Here we go again..." The frazzled physicist uttered to himself, with a sigh under his breath.

Just then, an angry and determined expression came over Miranda's face, as she raised her hands, once again engulfing them in cerulean flames.

"Wait!" Gordon urged, placing his hand over one of hers, before she could rush in to attack, which she was surely preparing to do.

"There's too many innocent people around..." He explained. "We can't do this here."

"Are you suggesting we let ourselves get taken?"

"Not at all...!" Gordon said, with a mildly conniving grin, as he turned back around towards the bar, and climbed over it. "Come on." He waved her over, as he ducked down. "Stay low, and follow me..."

Putting her trust in his instincts, the glow around Miranda's hands faded, as she quickly hopped the counter, and crouched down behind it.

"Uh... Hey! Wait!" Cameron pleaded, as she awkwardly tried to pull herself up, over the bar, to follow the two. "What are you doing?!"

"Would you get down!" Miranda demanded angrily, through her teeth, as she grabbed the front of McClane's dress, and dragged her over the counter.

"Ow!" Cameron cried out, as she flopped onto the floor. Luckily, there was a cushy floor mat in place to break her fall. "...Sorry." She said, as she cringed, and sat up.

Gordon was already busy, working his fingers into the grate of the ventilation duct, near the floor, he had involuntarily spotted when they first reached the bar earlier that evening.

"So, is this where you take all your first dates?" Miranda remarked with a playful sarcasm, once she saw what he was doing.

"...Nope!" He replied with a grunt, as he yanked the grate off with a good, hard, jerk. "You're the first..." He said, smiling a charming smile back at her, with the grate still in his hands.

"Well... Don't I feel special..."

"...We're going into the vents...?" Cameron queried ambivalently, as she rubbed her right shoulder, which had absorbed most of the fall, with a slightly pained look on her face.

"YOU'RE not going anywhere!" Miranda asserted, pointing a rigid finger at the reporter. "You're not following us, got it?!"

"You can't just leave me here!" Cameron exclaimed, pleadingly.

At that instant, the entire Nirasha Lounge became illuminated, as the bright, house lights finally came back on, leaving few places to hide.

"Look, I don't care either way, but we gotta hurry!" Gordon asserted, as he looked around, trying to peek over the bar, to see if anyone was approaching. "It won't take 'em long to send someone else back here, to check things out..."

As the last of the passengers were forced out of the room, and into the main corridor, a drell officer on active patrol caught sight of something strange. It was a gleaming, metallic object, towards the back of the club. He slowly walked over to it. And the closer he got, the more it started to resemble the outline of a handgun.

"What the hell...?" He said under his breath, finally reaching it, bending down to pick it up, and finding that his initial assessment had proven true. It was a silver, standard issue sidearm - the same exact model as the one he was carrying in his hand.

The drell looked up, and took a frantic look around the brightly lit room, when he suddenly spotted a salarian, in uniform, laying motionlessly near the Medley Bar, at the back of the club.

"Oh, shit!" He exclaimed in a whisper, as he darted towards his fallen cohort.

A small greenish trail marked the salarian's face, as a olive colored blood dripped off a deep gash on left his temple, leaving a small pool by his head.

"Maevik!" The drell called out, as he reached the fallen salarian, which seemed to murmur and groan faintly and imperceptibly in response.

"Hey!" He shouted out, as loud as he could, to a few other maligned guards in the room, doing a final sweep of the area, waving them over. "Hey, I got a man down over here!"

As soon as they heard, the others quickly bolted towards the disturbance, as the drell began taking a tentative look around, staying well on his guard. The first thing he spotted was the mangled bar stool used as the weapon, but there was no sign of the perpetrator. That's when he slowly began to step around the bar, with his handgun gripped tightly with both hands. He quickly aimed it down beneath the counter, where he thought for sure he'd find the culprit. But alas, nothing... He never even noticed the feminine fingers ever so gently locking the ventilation grate back into place, before disappearing into the darkness of the air duct.

"Oh jeez, what happened?" A human guard queried, noticing the downed salarian, as he and three others reached the Medley Bar.

"Someone busted a bar stool over his head!" The drell informed, as he stepped out from behind the bar. "Come on, give me a hand with him." He ordered, as he bent down to lift the salarian. The human officer quickly complied, as did the three in his company. They carefully hoisted him up, as his arms dangled motionlessly at his side. "We gotta get 'em to the medbay."

"Who did this?" The human demanded, with a look anger and resentment overtaking his countenance.

"I dunno, I didn't see it happen..." The drell explained, as they carried the wounded salarian towards the exit. "But whoever it was, there's no sign of 'em, and we had all the exits covered. They must've gotten pushed out with everyone else."

"Yeah, well when we find out who did this, we're gonna make the son of a bitch wish he was never born!"

* * *

><p>An elite few sat conversing around a lounge table, on the outskirts of the promenade deck, overlooking the casino - A salarian, a krogan, two humans, a geth, and a turian... The mood of the room had long since returned to its previous, lively condition, as patrons continued to drink, and gamble, and spend their credits, without a care in the world.<p>

"Well, I'm gonna hit the craps tables." Jacob announced, as he pushed away from the table, and stood up. "If anything WAS going on, we woulda heard something by now, and I came down here to play."

"Hold on..." Garrus interjected, as his discerning, hawk sharp eyes continued to meticulously scan the area for the slightest

discrepancy. "Something IS going down... I can smell it."

"What are you talking about?" Jacob queried, his interests peaked, as he leaned down against the table, with his palms flat on it.

"I used to work for C-Sec, remember?" Garrus began again, turning his attention back towards Jacob, and the others sitting at the table with him. "I can tell when a QT operation is underway."

"Since we've been here, Illustria Security's been on high alert." He continued to explain, as he pointed out the various guards positioned all around the casino. "They've been working double-time, and they're sweating bullets... They're nervous about something, and they don't want ANYONE else to know about it... Whatever's going on, they're keeping it on the down-low... At least until..."

There was a momentarily silence amongst the Normandy's crew at the table, as they began to take note of the strange behavior being exhibited by the guards. Many looked overly tense, and nervous â€" dabbing handkerchiefs on their heads to soak up the perspiration, as they secured the area. Others seem to be constantly checking the handgun in their holsters, as if antsy to pull them out, and use them.

"Until what?!" Joker demanded, after the brief, chilling silence.

"...Until whatever it is that's happening, goes down." Garrus finished.

"Inclined to agree." Mordin supplemented, tapping on his chin pensively, with one finger, while crossing his other arm. "Never this much security on duty all at once. Also, noted strategic positioning around exits and patrolling promenade around deck... Likely preparing for considerable task... Unloading passengers perhaps...?" He continued, talking mostly to himself, rhetorically, in his usual rapid-fire fashion. "No, no, would have heard announcement. Security would have been positioned within casino for removal, rather than around exits... Current placement aimed to keep passengers in, not out... Hmm..." He hummed musingly, before taking a deep breath. "More likely... Yes. Ship under siege. Inside conspiracy orchestrated by security personnel... Problematic."

The mere mention of the possibility, caused Joker's head to reel back in disbelief, with a worried shake of his head. Legion sat silently, computing the information, as small panels on his head motored back and forth, like a person furrowing their brows. Garrus seemed to just nod slowly, as Mordin's explanation only reaffirmed the conclusion he had already drawn. And Grunt... Grunt just began to smile, a demented little smile.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa...!" Jacob abjured adamantly, waving his hands before him in a criss-crossing motion, to dismiss the idea. "Listen to yourselves! We're being just a little overly paranoid here, aren't we...?"

"It would explain the loss of communications, Jacob..." Garrus offered up, with conviction.

"We probably just drifted out of comm buoy range...!" Jacob affirmed,

pointedly, most likely trying to convince himself, more than anyone else. "...O-or into a magnetic field that's causing interference. It happens... I think we're all just a little edgy, and jumping at shadows... We did just take down the Reapers, after all. Besides... The ship's own security team hijacking it...?" He stated rhetorically, with a scoff under his breath, as he leaned back a little, crossing his arms, with a skeptic look on his face. "That's a little far fetched, don't ya think?"

"EVERYBODY DOWN!"

POW! POW! POW!

A voice screamed! Three thunderous rounds of gunfire echoed throughout the casino! The guards drew their weapons, and began to force everyone into the center of the floor. And the room became overwhelmed with the uproar of pandemonium, as shrieking passengers began pouring into the Promenade Deck from every stairwell and entrance.

Joker turned his head to look up at Jacob, sighing rapidly, as if feigning a throaty laugh, while giving him an incredulous glare. "...You just HAD to go and say it, didn't you?!"

"Son of a bitch..." Jacob muttered with a sigh, as he placed one hand on his hip, and draped the other across his brow, shielding his eyes. "The ONE time I had to be wrong about something..."

"Hmph, well..." Garrus began, as he pushed his seat out, and stood up, looking over the others who were already doing the same. "Looks like it's time to go to work, fellas..."

"Yeah, you guys go do that..." Joker urged, as he sank down in his seat, and pulled the brim of his cap down tightly over his eyes. "I'll just... stay here and... pretend I'm helping..."

"Heh... heh... heh... heh..." Grunt released a slow, diabolic laugh, as he torqued his neck from side to side, with a series of cracks. "Now, it's a vacation!"

Like a dam giving way under tremendous pressure, people began flooding into the grand, wide-open, casino from it's multiple entrances around the deck, with their hands on their heads, as a legion of security guards routed them in, scared and screaming.

The Promenade Deck itself was basically one, big, massive room. The Casino made up the majority of the deck, nestled directly at the center. There was a small stage, towards the stern of the ship, past all the game tables, and gambling machines, to house performances. And towards the bow, there were a number of small, open area restaurants, bars, and lounging areas. On the other side of a panoramic window, that almost circumnavigated the entire length of the deck, was a scenic walkway, with a perfectly unhindered view of the cosmos, where passengers could lounge under the celestial glow of the stars. But now, as anarchy reigned, that walkway would only serve as a prime patrol route for the traitors to their uniforms, flooding the deck with hostages.

"Alright, listen up! Everyone into the center, on the floor, with your hands on your head!" A booming voiced, burly built human

announced over the shrieks, as the guards around the edge of the deck began closing in, keeping the prisoners in line, like shepherds driving sheep into a pen. They began shoving quasar, and slot machines aside, throwing chairs, and flipping over game tables to clear space, as the dealers simply looked on in terror, before being swallowed up by the ensuing panicked mass. "Keep moving! Do as your told and no one has to die!"

"You're gonna stop all this..." A scarred turian demanded, showing no recoil whatsoever, as he stepped up to a concentration of guards, near the center of the casino, that were trying to quell the rabble. "Right now."

"Hey, back down turian!" The rotund human officer, barking a majority of the orders, demanded, as he stepped towards Garrus, with his gun aimed at his face. "Get in line with everyone else! This is the only time I'm gonna... warn... you..." Just then, his demands dwindled to stutters, as he noticed the four others beginning to fan out around him. "K-krogan...? Geth?!"

The other officers each began to turn, and divert their attention away from the task of corralling everyone in, as they beheld the intimidating sight of Garrus, Mordin, Grunt, Legion, and Jacob intrepidly closing in around them, with a purpose.

"You people stay back!" An asari officer shouted, as a line of traitorous guards began to form against a line of heroes — each of them holding their standard issue sidearms aimed at a separate target, with their fingers primed on the triggers. "All of you! Disperse! This is your last chance!"

"No, it's yours." Jacob challenged, as his hands became glowing conduits of biotic energy. "Let these people go. Now. We don't wanna have to hurt you..."

"Uh, W-we've got active biotics here!" One of the guards sputtered nervously, with his hand pressed against his communicator, as his weapon hand began to waiver. "Need help containing the situation!"

"I've had enough of this!" The brawny human officer, at the center of the traitorous pack suddenly exclaimed, with a sudden burst of audacity, as he materialized his omni-tool. "If you people won't back down... You'll be put down!" He shouted, as he lunged forward, aiming a stiff right hook at Garrus' face, with his now electrified omni-tool blazing a blue trail.

"Huh?!"

Garrus glared with a cold steel look in his eyes, at the utterly stunned assailant before him, as he squeezed tightly on his wrist — having caught his omni-taser with unnatural quickness, and uncanny reflexes, moments before it could strike him. Now it just buzzed, and arched electrical discharge inches from his face.

"Try to tase _me_...?" Garrus questioned disdainfully, in a low, rumbling voice, as he raised a displeased eyebrow.

Suddenly, with his free hand, Garrus grabbed the guard's other wrist — the one still clutching the gun. With a heaving thrust, he raised

both the degenerate's hands high above his head, yanking the guard forward, and bringing him face to face with the scarred turian " so close, that he could feel the heat of his breath on his perspiring face, as the other officers simply looked on with befuddled intimidation, at this incomprehensible turn of events.

"You picked the wrong turian..."

WHAM! With dizzying speed, Garrus brought his arms down, wrapping them tightly around the back of the guard's head, slamming it down against his elevating knee, with a bone chilling crack.

"Uaah...!" The officer grunted in pain, as Garrus snatched the weapon out of his grip, before letting him collapse to the floor.

"Shit! We've got hostiles!" One of the guards, another human, shouted as they all began backtracking, and immediately opened fire... Futility.

Every round collided against a shimmering blue barrier, rippling where it struck, as Jacob held his ignited hands out in front of him, protecting the group.

"RRRAAAAAA!" Grunt's powerful, piercing voice bellowed, as he charged out from behind Jacob's biotic wall, and into the fray.

Before they could even target him, or even realize what was happening, the krogan singled out the closest thing he could find " an unfortunate salarian, who was plowed to the floor, as Grunt careened against him like a freight train.

"Here, let me help you!" Grunt shouted, as he bent down, and grabbed the handlebar-like protrusion on the front of the punch-drunk salarian's uniform, over his chest, using it to hoist him up.

"I AM URDNOT GRUNT...!" He roared, as he continued his charge into a small, unsuspecting agglomeration of guards, who were too busy trying to shoot through Jacob's shimmering biotic wall. Grunt was met with stunned, terrified expressions, as he actually began using the salarian as a weapon, swinging him around, and slamming him into the other officers, almost like a baseball bat. "...AND I AM KROGAN!"

"...W-watch out for the civilians!" Garrus shouted out, reeling a bit from Grunt's excessive use of force, as usual, as he cocked back the slider on the pistol, and removed the safety.

"Everybody get back!" Jacob shouted towards the huddled masses of frightened passengers, as they looked on in shock. "Get out of the line of fire, we'll protect you!" He ordered, as he slowly started pushing forward with his barrier " rotating at an angle so as to put it between the guards, and as many innocent bystanders as he could.

The thunderous crack of gunfire erupted through the room, echoing off the high reaching ceiling, and bouncing off the walls, as every single one of the Illustria's security personnel in the immediate vicinity rushed in, and began opening fire.

A handgun wasn't exactly his forte, but it would have to do. Garrus

bolted forward, out of Jacob's biotic barrier, and dove down behind a sideways laying quasar machine â€" using it for cover, as he began to return fire, and pick off targets.

"Here! Try this on!" Jacob shouted through his clenched teeth, drawing his fiery hands back, and clenching them into fists, as he channeled every last bit of energy he could muster into them.

With the force of a tidal wave, Jacob unfurled his energy in a vicious maelstrom, channeled directly at the largest congregation of guards directly before him. And like a tsunami crashing down upon them, the biotic pulse immediately swept up five of the guards, directly at the center of the cluster â€" slamming them against the wall behind them, with enough force to snap spines.

Jacob stopped for a moment, inhaling and exhaling deep breaths, as he hunched over, with his hands on his thighs, allowing himself a second to breath. The lack of his combat biotic amp made generating and sustaining attacks and defenses much more rigorous, and exhausting. Not to mention requiring twice the concentration. But while he took his breather, he watched another wave of guards quickly moving in to attack position, as Garrus and the others fought them back. Suddenly, a stray round ricocheted off a nearby pillar, striking only inches away from a helpless hanar passenger. Jacob shook his head with a determined, defiant countenance, as he took a deep breath, and raised his shimmering hands once more - generating his biotic barrier again, like a wall of safety between the corrupt officers, and the innocent bystanders.

"Everybody keep your heads down! Stay behind me!" Jacob instructed the passengers, in a labored voice, as he quickly began showing the early signs of fatigue.

The terrified agglomeration simply huddled together, in a tight knit array â€" possibly to make the job of the stalwart biotic in front of them easier. But more than likely, they simply sought comfort amongst themselves, with each other, to get through this horrifying ordeal.

"On our left! The geth, the geth!" A turian guard shouted, to his nearby salarian partner, when he suddenly took note of the large, mechanical combatant, with an N7 on its chest, rapidly approaching their position.

They immediately swung their weapons away from the bulk of the firefight, and began rapidly discharging on Legion, as he simply continued his brisk march towards them â€" their rounds ricocheting harmlessly off his shields.

They quickly scrambled backwards, firing round after round, as he encroached upon them, until... Clack... Clack...

"Oh, shit!" The turian exclaimed, in a panic, rapidly grabbing for a spare thermal clip on his belt, and fumbling to eject the empty one, just as they were met by the powerful geth.

"Who-oh!" Both guards shouted in unison, as Legion reached out, grabbing both men by the collars of their shirts, and hoisting them high into the air, well above his optic eye level, before either could replace the empty clips in their guns.

"This unit's kinetic barriers are pre-installed into our hardware platform." Legion announced, in a reverberating, monotone voice, as their feet dangled and kicked, while he held them high above his head.

"Ahh! Let us go!"

"We fail to comprehend your actions!" He stated, with traces of what could be considered organic-like anger in his voice, as both men struggled, trying fruitlessly to break free of the synthetic's grip. "You are agents of law enforcement, bearing a duty to protect property, assets, and organic life... Yet you exhibit an open belligerence towards them. Why? We cannot reach a consensus..."

"Let us go you walking scrap heap!" The salarian guard demanded, as he then began kicking against Legion's metallic abdomen as hard as he could with his feet. In a similar gesture, the turian raised the depleted handgun he had been holding onto, and started bashing the barrel down hard against the geth's arched head.

Legion's brightly illuminated aperture seemed to churn, and focus, and the light itself seemed to intensify, as he lowered the malefactors down to his optic's level.

"Consensus achieved." He announced in a cold, chilling, metallic voice, as both men glared into his optics scanners, with both fear and awe. "Hostility confirmed. We will respond accordingly."

As soon as he said it, Smack! He slammed both their heads together with bone-crushing force, and a blood curdling crack. The guns they held in their hands dropped to the floor, as their limbs fell lifelessly to their sides, and their heavy heads hunched over their chests, motionlessly. With these two taken care of, Legion simply released his grip on their collars, allowing them to drop to the floor, and collapse like rag dolls.

He bent down, stripped one of their gunbelts of two thermal clips, and picked up both handguns. With masterful speed, mechanical movements, and surgical know-how, Legion promptly loaded the two new clips into both depleted weapons, cocked them, and released the safety mechanism.

He looked out at the all too familiar scene of battle, as a salvo of gunfire thundered nearby. He primed both weapons, twirling one on each index finger, like an old west desperado, as he raised them, and readied himself for combat.

The guards that were already in place within the Promenade Deck's casino were quickly being dispatched. But more and more continued to flood in from the crowded stairwells "leaving the vast amount of frightened passengers still within them, unattended and looking on in an agitated stupor.

A handful of four seasoned officers made their way around the outer edge of the main battleground, in the center of the former casino. At the head of the pack was a turian, followed by two asari, and a drell. They stayed low to the ground, moving swiftly, with their sidearms brandished, using the deck's various pillars, and the columns with blazing braziers at the top, for cover. They stealthily

came to an aisle of still standing slot machines, which they quickly traversed to gain a prime flanking position on the enemy. As they exited the aisle, they were suddenly confronted by a salarian's back. The back of a salarian scientist, to be more precise, in a casual gray suit, who seemed to simply be looking out at the bloody engagement, contemplatively, with one arm crossed, as he tapped on his lower lip with two fingers, like someone keying a piano.

"You! Salarian! Put your hands up!" The gruff turian officer at the head of the experienced pack demanded, rigidly aiming his barrel at Mordin's back. "Now!"

"Hmm...?" Mordin hummed intrigued, as he turned around to face his captors. "...But of course." He said, as he compliantly raised his hands by his head.

"Ahhh!" "My eyes!" Suddenly, out of nowhere, a blindingly bright light pierced their retinas, forcing the guards to immediately shield their eyes, and stagger around in a blind daze.

Mordin lunged forward at the disoriented turian, after having dematerialized his omni-tool. He grabbed at the officers armed hand, and torqued it around, forcing him to jab his own weapon under his chin. POW! A sputter of blood shot out from the top of the turian's head, as the bullet pierced his cranium.

While the dead officer collapsed, Mordin kept his tight grip on his pistol, and with lightning fast quickness... POW! POW! POW! Three well placed shots, at the center of the skulls of the two asari, and the drell security officers, leaving them dead before they could hit the floor... From blinding flash, to darkness, all within a matter of seconds...

"Thought I was harmless, did you?" Mordin questioned, standing over the four bodies, still holding the smoking pistol, as he materialized his omni-tool. He quickly brought up a snapshot photograph of the four guards, all of which were either turning away, or shielding their eyes.

"Mmm..." He muttered to himself, shaking his head with disappointment, as he looked down at the four fallen officers. "Bad picture... You blinked."

While the furious torrent of gunfire continued to thunder throughout Promenade Deck's former casino, a lone human guard, with a hemorrhaging hole in his leg crawled away, leaving a crimson trail of blood in his wake, as he sought shelter behind an overturned lounge table. He rested his back against it, heaving, and panting in pain, and terror as he quickly began to regret thinking this was ever a good idea. "He-help!" He shouted, with droves of gasping breaths, into his radio, as he pressed against his communicator. "Help! We... We're getting torn apart down here! We need backup!"

* * *

><p>"Well..." Commander Andrew Kim began, clasping his hands together with a loud clap, as he came up to Tarrik, and Kargas, barely able to contain the eager anticipation on his scarred face. "If my guess is right. My boys should be gathering up the last of the passengers into the Promenade Deck, as we speak... There'll be a few stragglers here

and there, but no where for them to go... My guys'll get 'em when they do a complete sweep of the ship."<p>

"Excellent, Commander." Tarrik affirmed, with a satisfied nod, and his stubby hands on his stout hips. "I'm impressed. Any idea of how big a payout we're looking at...?"

"Whew..." Kim drew an excited breath, as a wide smile crept in on his face. "A big one... The ransom and cash we can get from some of these people is... Mind boggling!" He announced, shaking his hands, and speaking with an almost child-like exuberance. "The entertainment alone... We've got some of the biggest artists in the galaxy, right here on this ship. Expel 10 is on-board... The Vy'Zaira Venue... Lethelio Theryndl... Vaenia Melanis..." He continued, counting the names off on his fingers. "God only knows how much they're worth...! As for the passengers, I haven't had a chance to look over the manifest, but this ship ALWAYS books the richest of the rich. And I don't think this voyage will be any excep..." Kim suddenly cringed a bit, as loud fracas began to drill in his ear.

"Excep... Exception-what the hell's going on down there?!" He demanded, forcibly finishing his sentence, before swiftly pressing his hand to his communicator. "What?! Say again! ...Well shoot them, what's the problem?! ...Massacred?! What the fuck do you mean you're getting 'massacred'?! By who?!"

"...Fuck!" He exclaimed, as he withdrew his hand from his ear, and started over to Leahr'Haan, who was still sitting at the console, at the front of the bridge. Kargas turned, and observed the human's newly agitated condition very carefully... A weathered, centuries old krogan knows only too well when he smells trouble.

"Quarian!" Kim called out demandingly, as he came to stand behind Leahr. "Can you bring up the surveillance feed for the Promenade Deck?"

"Uh, yeah... Sure." Leahr'Haan acknowledged, as he swiveled forward in his seats, and began working the console controls.

"Problems, Commander?" Tarrik queried, with a heavy respirator breath, and a tinge of concern in his voice, as he followed the fog-eyed Kim to the console, coming to stand beside him.

Andrew sighed. "...There's something going on on the Promenade Deck. Somebody's fighting back..."

"I thought you assured me your men could handle this little task, Commander..."

"They can!" Kim asserted, with an irate snarl, putting a hand up to Tarrik's face, as if telling him to shut up. "I'm sure it's not as bad as it sounded..."

Just then, the screen before Leahr'Haan lit up, exhibiting a bird's eye view of what exactly was transpiring on the Promenade Deck.

"What... in the hell...?!" Commander Kim uttered to himself, in a hushed tone of voice, as he stood beholding the inconceivable, with a wide eye, and mouth agape.

Kargas too joined the volus and the human, as they gazed on the image - ruminated in silent disbelief. There on the screen before them, the sight of tracer fire blazed back and forth, as a small group of resisters stood firm against a legion of uniformed malefactors. The casino had been effectively transformed into a trench warfare battlefield, as the resisters used downed slot machines, and blackjack tables to create a defensive rampart between them, and the badge wearing aggressors. Many bodies of which laid strewn lifelessly across the battlefield. The officers did their best to hold their own, as they positioned themselves behind columns and pillars, trying to cautiously pick out opportune times in which to duck out of cover, to return fire " many finding this to be a costly mistake...

"Wh... What the hell's going?!" Kim exclaimed, in an enraged outburst, as he helplessly watched his men quite literally being massacred. "A geth?! A krogan?! Who the fuck are these people?!"

"The biotic..." Tarrik said softly to himself, in an unheard whisper, as his eyes studiously observed the screen " zeroing in on Jacob's gallant efforts to protected the frightened, huddled, congregation. "They're trying to keep the passengers safe..." He thought to himself, as an idea quickly started brewing within his diabolical little mind.

"Things not going quite as you envisioned, Andrew?!" The Captain called out, from his place, facing the back wall, with his hands on his head, in a voice expressing both mocking anger, and a happy sarcasm.

A look of seething, indignant, contempt overtook the Commander's expression, as he clenched his hands into tight, white-knuckled fists, and took a step toward the Captain, with the most malicious of intentions in mind.

"Davix! Teshya! You two are with me!" Kargas' deep, creaky voice interjected, as he pulled the large shotgun off his back, which expanded into an even larger weapon in his hands. "We'll handle this!"

The two mercenaries were still the ones keeping their eyes on the captured crew members, lined up against the back wall of the bridge. But the order put a sinister gleam in their eyes, as the grip on their weapons tightened with devious anticipation.

"That won't be necessary." Tarrik assured, confidently, causing the krogan to look back at the volus with a skeptic eye, and leaving him, and his two companions with itchy trigger fingers. "I have a better idea..."

"Commander Kim." He continued, as he looked up at the scarred human officer. "If you'd be so kind as to grab the Captain. We're going to need him..."

A devilish grin grew on the Commander's face, as his frigid gaze narrowed, and focused on Captain Ryback, who in turn was already lowering his arms, and turning around with a look of intrepid pride on his face, as if saying "Do your worst."

Kim drew his uniquely elegant heavy pistol from his holster, and held it up, as he walked towards the Captain, and said in a cold, emotionless voice. "It would be my pleasure..."

* * *

><p>"RAAAAAHAHAHA!" Grunt bellowed, and cackled all at the same time, as he rammed a pair of turian guards straight through a roulette table, snapping it in two, with a clamorous crash. His casual outfit was already soaked in quite a few large splotches of blood. But whether or not they were his own, would remain to be seen. He stirred out of the debris, leaving the two turians behind buried in it, as he grabbed one of the table's legs that had snapped off, wielding it like a baseball bat, as he rampaged forward once more.<p>

In contrast, Garrus, Legion, and Mordin were taking a much different approach to the battle. While Grunt ran around in a berserker rage, the others used the tried and true strategy of watching their flanks, and keeping the enemy suppressed under a steady barrage of fire, from behind their makeshift defensive mound, slowly dwindling the enemy numbers one by one.

Behind them, Jacob's arms were already beginning to tremble, and quiver, as drops of perspiration rolled off his face profusely â€" dripping onto the floor, and leaving his stylish, tan colored suit soaked.

"Hey Vakarian!" He shouted out, in a panting voice, to the turian who ducked back down behind his cover, after having successfully claimed two new targets."...You guys better wrap this up quick! There's a lot of innocent people here, and I can't keep this up all night!"

"We're workin' on it!" Garrus shouted back, in rebuttal, as rounds continued to riddle the opposite side of their cover. "There's like a hundred of these guys! And only so much we can do with these damn pea shooters of theirs!"

"Well, keep at-"

"Ah-he-hem..." The sound of a throat forcibly being cleared echoed loudly throughout the entirety of the war scarred casino, from most every speaker installed throughout the deck.

"Could I get everyone's attention for a moment?." A deep breathing voice questioned, as a theater sized, holographic screen, overlooking the casino, suddenly lit up on the far side, near the ceiling, displaying the image of a pudgy little volus, to accompany the voice. Perspective wise, it appeared to the left of the Normandy's combatant's position, and to the right of the opposing guards'.

The visage of the volus brought an abrupt, albeit tense ceasefire to the battle, as everyone stopped what they were doing, while still keeping in cover, as they looked on. Jacob released his barrier, as he collapsed to one knee, huddled over in exhaustion. And Grunt halted his destructive binge, at least for the time being.

"I AM sorry to interrupt." Tarrik announced, from his omnipotent looking screen. "But I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask that all of you please drop your weapons, and surrender peacefully..."

Unsure if the authoritarian-like volus could hear them, Garrus, Mordin, and Jacob shared a brief, ambivalent glance, before confirming something to each other with their eyes. They each looked back up at the volus on the titanic screen, and responded with a stiff, determined, concurrent shake of their heads. "Not a chance!" They said in silence.

"I have a feeling that you'll reconsider..." The arrogant volus continued, as he began walking to the left, and the camera panned with him, to show the sight of the ship's captive Captain, being restrained from behind, at gunpoint, by the malevolent Commander Kim.

Garrus, Jacob, and Mordin immediately bowed, and shook their heads with a defeated sigh, as they immediately recognized this coward's tactic... Legion also understood the grave turn of events, as various panels on his head motored back and forth "but he lacked the emotional capacity to properly express himself.

"I really don't think any of you want to see any harm come to the Carmenta Illustria's own esteemed Captain..." The chauvinistic volus declared, standing before the restrained Skipper, who stood gallant, and unflinching, with the gun aimed at his head. "Such a distinguished career... Coming to such a tragically abrupt, and quite frankly pointless end..."

"...Oh, and something to consider, if you should happen to need any more incentive-" He continued, mockingly, as the camera panned a bit further to his left, showing the row of crew members facing the back wall, with their hands on their heads, as Teshya and Davix kept their weapons primed right on them. "-We've got the entire bridge crew here, to dispose of, until you've decided you had enough... It's an awful lot of innocent blood to have on your hands... I wouldn't want it."

"Listen to me!" Captain Ryback spoke up, pleadingly looking down at the Normandy's crew, as he struggled a bit, only to have Kim restrain him tighter. "All of you! Do what you have to do... I don't care what happens to me. But please... Please, don't let them hurt my passengers, or my crew..."

Jacob darted over to where Mordin, Garrus, and Legion were convened, in a hunkered down state.

"...What do you think?" He questioned, in a whisper, as they huddled.

"I dunno..." Garrus replied, with a dubious shake of his head. "No sign of Shepard yet. You think he's loose somewhere?"

"Quite possible." Mordin added, with a less than confident nod. "Shepard likely to have caught wind of subterfuge as we did. Engaged in stealth operation. Make way to source of communication disruption. Disable. Send distress signal." He paused for a moment, as he inhaled a deep breath. "...Or, equally as possible; met with similar threat of hostage execution. Idealistic nature forces to surrender. We simply haven't seen him yet... Hmm... precarious."

"Nah, I don't buy that..." Jacob replied, in a hushed voice, with a

firm shake of his head. "Shepard and Tali wouldn't let themselves get taken... They're loose somewhere. I know it."

"You might be right." Garrus concurred, as the ominous, glowing screen, loomed over them, displaying a captive Captain, and a volus quickly losing his patience. "Shepard knows if you're hunting with only one bullet, you wait for a clean shot... And I don't see Miranda or Freeman around either..."

"If those four are loose, these guys got way bigger problems than us..." Jacob supplemented. "Hang it up...?" He questioned, looking to Garrus for approval.

Which he quickly gave. "Hang it up."

"Well it's about time!" Tarrik sharply asserted, with a loud hiss from his respirator, when he noticed Garrus, Legion, Mordin, and Jacob stand up, and drop their weapons, with their hands held high. "I'm sure the Captain was growing impatient."

"Hmrrrrr..." Grunt growled under his breath, as he began snorting angrily through his nostrils, like a raging bull, from his place, just on the opposite side of the defensive mound.

"Grunt!" Garrus called out, in a stern tone of voice, uncharacteristic for him. "We're surrendering. Drop your... table leg." He demanded, as he observed the krogan holding the metallic, snapped off limb of a roulette table.

"I don't take orders from you, Garrus." He declared, as his grip tightened around his provisional club. "And a krogan... doesn't... SURRENDER!" He screeched in a fury, as he raised his weapon, and hurled with incredible force, at a cluster of enemy guards â€" most of which ducked out of the way.

"Commander Kim." Tarrik calmly ushered, as he turned. And on cue, the uniformed Commander slid the safety mechanism off his pistol with his thumb, and pressed it firmly against the side of Ryback's head, knocking his white naval cap off, and forcibly tilting his head to the side, with a pained look on his face.

"Grunt!" Garrus shouted again, this time with a despaired sense of alarm in his voice, as the krogan began to charge once more.

Suddenly, the hulking combatant felt himself being restrained back, but not by a person â€" by a force. "Hey! let me go!" He demanded, as he found himself encased within Jacob's blue, biotic envelope.

"Grunt! Your battle master wouldn't want this!" Garrus declared angrily, while Jacob did his best to contain the seething krogan. "You'll either answer to us now! Or you'll answer to him later!"

Surprisingly, Grunt immediately stopped resisting at the mere mention of feared and immensely respected krogan designation. But he didn't seem any happier about it. "...Fine!" He snarled, as Jacob set him down.

"Good!" Tarrik jubilantly exclaimed, as Commander Kim released his grip on the Captain, and stepped beside him, amicably, with his gun still drawn, however. "I knew we could all reach a civilized agreement."

At that instant, without warning, or provocation, the fog-eyed Security Commander suddenly turned, and extended his weapon hand to the Captain's temple once again. POW! Captain Ryback could actually be heard exhaling his final breath, as the shot pierced his skull. His eyes opened wide in either shock, or agony, for an infinitesimal moment, before they slowly rolled back into his head, and closed, as he collapsed to the ground. It all happened so fast, and yet every tiny millisecond was so painstakingly distinguishable.

"No!"

"You son of a...!"

"Ah-ah-ah..." The Commander urged, waving a dissuading finger back and forth, causing the Normandy's team to halt in their tracks, as he aimed his large handgun at the rest of the crew lined up against the wall "looking on and quivering in terror and sorrow.

"That was to show you we're serious..." He announced, as he slowly walked backwards, alongside the lined up crew, looking them over very carefully "each of them cowering at his baleful glance. "You assholes try something like this again-" He continued, as he suddenly yanked a young, human female ensign, with short, brown hair, out from the line up, and held her in front of him, for the camera.

"Please no...!" She begged, with a soft, whimpering voice, as she quivered, and two streams of tears rolled down her eyes.

"-And next time I might pick someone a little younger." He assured, in a disgusting, detestable tone, as he smelled her hair, and lightly caressed the side of her face, with the barrel of his gun, in an almost sensual manner. "And a lot prettier..."

He held her for a moment, trembling and bowing her head in dread, as the valiant team looked on helplessly, fearful that any moment she too would succumb to the Captain's fate. Seeing this, Kim simply shoved her back against the wall, and raised his weapon, idly.

"Get some restraints on them." He ordered his men, with a crooked, sly smile. "Let me know if they try anything again. Camera off."

Tarrik held out his omni-tool, and summoned his holographic camera drone back into it, before putting it away.

"That's it." The callous, unfeeling monster of a Commander said aloud, though mostly talking to himself, as he holstered his impressive gun. "The ship is ours..."

10. Chapter 10: We've Seen Worse

****Salvation: Episode I "The Taking of the Carmenta Illustria"****

Disclaimer: This fan-fiction is part of an episodic series taking place after Salvation: A Half-Life/Mass Effect Universe Fan Fiction, which will lead directly to its sequel, Salvation II: Project Prometheus. These episodes and sequel take place OUTSIDE of the Mass Effect 3 continuity. Characters property of their respective companies, Half-Life created by Valve and Mass Effect created by Bioware.

****Chapter 10: We've Seen Worse...****

The terrified passengers continued to pour into the Promenade Deck from the entrances and stairways. Hundreds of them. Perhaps thousands... They were quieter now. Calmer. Compliant. Subdued... The fear was still prevalent in their eyes, and on their faces, but a frightened hush fell over them, as they were drawn into the Promenade Deck by the armed betrayers, like cattle into a pen.

"Alright, sit down, and keep quiet!" A gun toting, uniformed salarian demanded, as one by one, he ushered the passengers by, into a rapidly growing thicket of lifeforms, all sitting in a tightly huddled cluster, at the center of what used to be the Casino. "Come on, hurry up! Keep it moving!"

Nearby, several of the other uniformed guards worked at clearing the area of the fallen debris, and wreckage, from the brief, albeit devastating, firefight that had ensued moments ago. The center most area that had once been occupied with craps, roulette, and blackjack tables, along with quasar and slot machines, as well as a multitude of other, more exotic, alien banking games, had now been completely cleared to make room for the hostages.

They no longer dared contended against their oppressors. Instead, as they were herded in, they'd only tremble in silence, or let forth a muddled whimper. Parents would hold their children tightly and cover their eyes, as the bloodied bodies of the fallen officers were hauled away by their brothers in corruption.

Perhaps it was the sight of the ship's Captain being executed in cold blood that pacified the chaotic rabble into a tranquil, fearful mass. Maybe it was the understanding that these armed thugs, would in fact, not hesitate to kill them should they oppose their captors. Or maybe it was seeing that the few brave figures that had stepped forth to defend them, were now nothing more than prisoners, just like they were...

A clicking sound came, as a young turian guard locked Garrus' hands behind his back with a sturdy pair of silver handcuffs at the front of the congregating group of civilians. Garrus, much like the fellow combatants in his company, didn't resist - but his countenance reflected a deep, seething anger.

Close by, an asari guard rummaged through the pocket's of Jacob's stylish, tan coat, which she held dangling in her hands, leaving him in the long-sleeved, black dress shirt he was wearing underneath. Beside them, a human female officer patted an already handcuffed Mordin from top to bottom "likely searching for weapons, or perhaps valuables.

"Frisking is pointless. You realize this, don't you?" Mordin offered up in an arrogant tone, as he held his head high, in a snide manner.

"If intended to kill you, do not need weapons to do so..." He gloated, as he turned around to face her. "Or hands for that matter... Can think of s...even different ways to render you incapacitated or worst, without metacarpal use... Oh! Eight actually!" He suddenly exclaimed, with a jovial grin, as a new devious idea crossed his mind. "Hmm... Will have to remember that last one."

The woman moved her head back, and faced away cautiously, however still keeping her eyes on Mordin. Eyes which seemed to reflect the tense, apprehensive look of someone handling a deadly animal â€" fearful that at any moment it could attack.

"...Yeah, whatever." She muttered in an unsteady voice, trying hard to convey a fraudulent sense of fearlessness. "Just shut up and sit down..."

"This one's clean!" The asari guard nearby shouted out, as she finished her search of Jacob's coat. She quickly discarded it, tossing it back at him, managing to hang it over his shoulder for a moment, before it slid down, and fell onto the floor.

"Yeah, this one too." The turian officer attending to Garrus announced in a gruff tone of voice, as he grabbed him by the shoulder, and forcibly spun him around. "Alright, sit down!"

"Watch it, boy!" Garrus demanded through clenched teeth, with a sneered nose, and an incensed gleam in his eyes. "The salarian's right. We don't need our hands to take you down."

"Yeah, and next time, we won't hold back the krogan." Jacob added, as he turned to look towards Grunt, who at that moment, despite having had his tree-limb-like arms tightly restrained behind his back, startled a salarian officer half to death, and caused him to stumble and fall backwards, simply by lunging his massive head towards him in a threatening manner.

"So don't piss us off again..." Jacob concluded.

"Alright, alright..." The turian that had been attending to Garrus said with an anxious sigh, and a flustered shake of his head. "We're done. Just... sit 'em down, and make sure they're cuffed good and tight. Lets finish getting everyone else in here...!"

The small group of malefactors, responsible for restraining the combatants, stepped aside and walked away, as if not being able to flee their presence fast enough. As the other officers continued on with their duties, guarding the exits, and corralling people into the rapidly expanding pool of lifeforms at the center of the deck, an asari, salarian, human, and turian took the time for a quick, private meeting.

"These guys are making me nervous..." The black haired, human woman started.

"Take it easy." The turian insisted, making sure to keep his voice down. "Did you have any problems cuffing the geth?"

"No..." She replied, as she turned for a brief glance towards the constrained Legion, sitting placidly at the head of the group of

hostages, along side his team mates. "Though I can't say I've ever had to handcuff a geth before..." She finished, as she turned back around.

"I don't know why we're keeping 'em here like this..." The asari added in a low tone, as if worried they might overhear. "We should just kill 'em all, and be done with it..."

"Yeah!" The salarian softly exclaimed, trying to hold back an outburst.

"Look... Commander Kim said just to put some restraints on 'em. That's all..." The turian offered forth, in an attempt to quell the others.

"They took out fifteen of our guys, Larne...!" The asari admonished angrily, as she pointed a hand out towards the stack of bodies being piled in a far corner - each of which wore a familiar security uniform. "Fuck what Commander Kim said!"

"Yeah..." The turian replied in a condescending tone, tilting his head, and giving a brash roll of his eyes, as he placed his hands on his hips. "Fifteen of our guys... And we didn't put a SINGLE scratch on any one of them..."

The salarian, asari, and human woman all stopped, as they glanced back and forth at one another, reflecting on the truth of the turian's words...

"Don't be stupid..." He continued. "Besides, you heard them... You think they're just gonna sit still while we go by and execute 'em...? No, the best thing we can do right now is leave well enough alone, and follow orders... And think of it this way... Fifteen of our guys... That's fifteen LESS shares... Fifteen less ways our profits get divvied up..." An arrogant, crooked smirk grew on his face, as he leaned back on one leg, and crossed his arms. "Hmph... I'm actually pretty okay with that. The way I see it, they did us a favor..."

"...Mathew!" A loud voice, mired in desperation, unexpectedly rang out from the crowd, projecting over all the barked orders, and frightened chatter, as a human man in an expensive looking suit, with a glazed over, yet determined look in his eyes staggered out of line, garnering everyone's attention, including the four guards privately convened.

"Back in to line, you!" A nearby asari officer demanded, as she marched up to the staggering father, with her weapon drawn.

"Go da'hell...!" He slurred, as he stumbled around, on rubbery legs, like a punch-drunk boxer. "I'm tryna find mah son...!"

"Alex!" A woman screamed.

Just as he nearly toppled to the ground, his wife rushed to his side, hooking him by the waist, and drawing his arm around her neck and shoulders, leaving her supporting most of his weight. Despite his fervor, his now heavy head drooped flaccidly over his chest, as he continued to bumble around in a drowsy, disoriented daze. His eyes were glazed over, nearly rolling into the back of his skull. And the

rear of his white shirt collar, and the back of his dark gray suit were both stained in blood, as a small, steady trickle ran down the back of his neck, painting a crimson trail.

"Angie..." He slurred, as his knees suddenly gave out, leaving her carrying all of his weight, and giving her no choice but to lower him down to the ground.

"Angie, he's not'ere..." He murmured in a groggy voice, as she laid him down, with a panicked, tearful look in her eyes. "Gotta find... find our boy..."

"Alex...!" She whimpered, as she looked down at him, clutching his hand tightly â€" terrified now, not only for the well being of their son, but also for her husband's rapidly deteriorating condition. "Alex, hold on... We'll find him...!"

"What the hell...?" The asari beckoned with a furrowed brow, pulling her weapon back, and pointing it up towards the ceiling after realizing the threat was negligible. "What's wrong with him...?"

"What's wrong with him...!?" Angela glared up at the asari with tears in her eyes, and an indignant countenance. "You monsters split his head open! That's what's wrong with him!"

"Puhh..." The asari scoffed, as the line of sheep kept moving behind them. "He probably had it coming..."

Angela sneered furiously, as her breathing quickened. Just then she stopped, inhaled deeply, closed her eyes, and squeezed her husband's hand tightly, whose limp grip she could feel trying to squeeze back.

"Please..." She began, exhaling the breath, as she looked up pleadingly at the asari security officer.

"My husband's a major movie producer for Illium Entertainment..." She began to explain, in a bit of a shaky voice, as she wiped the tears from her eyes, leaving black streaks of mascara behind. "We have money...! We'll give you whatever you want, just please... Help my husband... And help us find our son...!"

The asari sighed, and shook her head, as she holstered her sidearm â€" perhaps reacting to nothing other than the promise of greater fortune.

"Alright..." She reluctantly acknowledged, as she turned to face the rabble, still being guided in.

"I need a Doctor here!" She shouted, with one hand cupped around her mouth. "Who here is a Doctor?!"

There was one person in the room who could, in all good conscience, not ignore the call. A seasoned physician with impeccable credentials. Not the least of which was a brief, albeit rewarding stint, caring for the riffraff of Omega.

"I am a Doctor!" Mordin shouted out in response, as he rose to his feet.

"No!" The turian guard who had previously been seeing to their restraining, abruptly shouted out, as he marched over towards Mordin - his finger pointed towards him, while looking over to the asari. "Not him! You find someone else." He demanded, turning back to face Mordin. "You sit back down!"

"That man requires medical attention!" Mordin rebutted, showing no intent of sitting back down. "Will not let you stop me from administering!"

"I-I said sit down!" The turian demanded, trying hard to mask the small stutter in his voice, with a bolstered tone.

Just then, before the commotion could go any further, a man still in line, wearing a white and red Carmenta Illustria Medical Personnel uniform, stepped forward, and raised his hand.

"I'm a Doctor...!" A feminine voice declared before he could even speak up, as a silver haired woman, in her early fifties, stood up from the crowd that had already been seated, giving the man in the medical staff uniform license to put his hand down, and step back into line.

Mordin turned around to face the source of the familiar voice, in the crowd behind him. Dr. Karin Chakwas, who was wearing a modest, black evening gown, trimmed with white sleeves, lining, and lace, from an interrupted evening of dinning and dancing, looked back at him, and gave him a subtle nod. Mordin reciprocated the nod, and compliantly sat back down.

"Alright. You!" The turian ordered, as he pointed at Dr. Chakwas, and waved her forward. "Go. Help him."

The good Doctor weaved her way through the tightly huddled mass of people sitting around her, at her feet, as rapidly as she could, while still being cautious not to step on any extremities. As she maneuvered, most of them leaned forward or back to clear as wide a path as they could. She could hear some of them crying, or whimpering in fear, as she passed them by.

"M... M-Matt... Mathew..." Alex muttered in a groggy, fading voice, as he languidly flailed one hand out, reaching up towards the ceiling.

"Shhh-Shhh..." Angela whispered, as she held onto his other hand, and softly caressed his face. "We'll find him...! I promise..."

"Ma...Matt... Mm-son..."

"I'm here...!" Dr. Chakwas announced, looking down at the patient, as she rushed to kneel at his side. "What happened?!"

"He got into a fight with one of the guards, upstairs..." She began to explain anxiously, as she squeezed his hand tightly. "They hit him on the back of the head with one of their guns. It started bleeding... a lot...!"

"Okay..." Dr. Chakwas replied in a calm, yet pressing tone of

voice.

Alex's head was now resting on a small, but slowly growing crimson pool of his own blood, as he continued to mutter incoherently - likely still calling out for his boy. Dr. Chakwas quickly yet carefully began to work her hands beneath his shoulders.

"Help me sit him up..." She instructed, as she began trying to lift him off the ground. "I need to see the wound."

Angela hooked her hands onto Alex's shoulders, and began to pull forward, as Dr. Chakwas lightly pushed from behind, propping him up into an upright, seated position. The Doctor then materialized her omni-tool, and quickly shined her flashlight onto the red, gaping gash at the rear of his cranium.

"Hmm..." Dr. Chakwas pondered, as she made a rapid assessment of the wound, and it's severity. "Hold him for a moment. Keep him up." She ordered, as she removed her hands from his back, forcing Angela to work a little harder to keep her husband upright.

As soon as her hands were free, Dr. Chakwas immediately grabbed her left dress sleeve with her right hand, and went to work tugging and tearing away at it. A ripping sound came, as the seam where her sleeve met the rest of her dress, split apart. The sound continued, as she fully ripped her white, velvety sleeve off, and slid it off her arm. Working with an almost instinctual knowledge, Karin quickly rolled the sleeve fabric up into a tight little cushion, and pressed it firmly against the hemorrhaging wound - instantly causing a rapidly growing cerise stain to begin consuming the shimmering white fabric.

"Put your hand here." Dr. Chakwas instructed, as she held the bundled cloth with one hand, and pressed against Alex's back with the other. Angela quickly complied, taking hold of the cloth, and freeing the Doctor's hand. "Lay him down against your lap, and keep pressure there."

"O-Okay..." Angela acknowledged, as they both began to recline Alex back down against Angela's lap. She quickly shifted from a kneeling, to sitting position, with her hands securely cradling Alex's head, and keeping pressure on his open wound.

Dr. Chakwas stood up, her hands now stained with blood, as she faced the nearby asari guard, still overseeing the situation.

"This man has a severely lacerated scalp, and a cranial fracture..." She informed, with a look of disdain for the malicious officer. "We need to get him to the ship's medical bay immediately."

"No." The asari sternly, and immediately refuted, without showing the least bit of marked remorse. "Nuh-uh. If you're gonna do something for him, you do it here. If there's something you need, we'll try and get it for you, but you're not going anywhere..."

Dr. Chakwas ground her teeth, and clenched her lips in anger, and in frustration, as she bowed and shook her head. Releasing an exasperated sigh, she then looked up with a submissive expression. "Fine..." She began in a softened, yet still very much irate, tone of voice. "The first thing I need to do is stop the bleeding. I need

medi-gel... I think I saw..." Her eyes began to pan around the deck, and her pointed finger followed, as she scanned the area. "There!" She exclaimed, zeroing-in on a wall-mounted case, with a red cross painted on it. "On the far wall. The first-aid station. I need medi-gel, gauze, and a cold-compress."

The asari nodded and let out a sharp whistle, towards a nearby male, human guard, keeping watch over the still moving stream of hostages being rallied in. His attention was naturally coerced by high-pitched the sound. As he looked over, the asari pointed a thumb over her shoulders, towards the distant wall behind her, where the first aid station was situated. "First-aid station. Need medi-gel, gauze, and an ice-pack."

"On it." He assured obediently, as he holstered his weapon, and bolted towards his objective.

"I'll also need a few things from the ship's medbay." Dr. Chakwas continued. "Some suturing supplies, antimicrobial agents, bandages, and a saline-dextrose IV infuser..."

"Fine, we'll see what we can do..." The asari nonchalantly assured, with a wave and a shrug "€" showing barely a shred of concern, not so much for the well-being of the man, but rather his credits.

"Well, thank you for that at least..." The Doctor replied, trying to contain the angry cynicism in her voice, with the sound of gratitude.

"Though I feel you should know..." She continued, eying the asari with a rigid glare. "All of you are making the biggest mistakes of your lives... You have no IDEA... what you've put yourselves up against..."

"Look lady, spare me the jowl, alright...?" The blue officer admonished. "Just do your job or you'll be laid out right next to him..."

With nothing further to say, Dr. Chakwas simply looked down at her patient, who was resting peacefully with his head in his wife's lap, and knelt back down at their side.

"Is... is he gonna be alright...?!" Angela beseeched, as she lovingly caressed the side of her husband's face with her one free hand.

"He's going to be just fine." Karin assured with a warm, comforting smile. "He's got a mild concussion, and he's suffering the effects of acute blood loss. But believe me when I tell you that I've seen much... MUCH worse... He'll be okay..."

"Thank you...!" She lauded, exhaling a deep, drawn out sigh of relief. "Thank you so much..."

"Ma'am...!" She then beckoned, as she immediately turned to look up at the asari, after bestowing her gratitude. "Ma'am, please...! My son... You have to let me go look for my son...!"

"Nuh-nuh-nobody's going anywhere!" The asari refuted angrily, waving a stiff finger back and forth like a metronome. "We're on it,

alright? Someone'll find your kid. And as soon as they do, they'll bring him down here."

"Oh, please don't hurt him...!"

"Nobody's gonna hurt him!" She sneered, with a heavy sense of annoyance in her voice. "Ju-just sit still, and you'll get 'em back before you know it..."

Angela slumped back down, as her neck sank below her shoulders. What more could she do, but take what these ruffians had to say at face value...? All she could do at that point was watch, as the human guard arrived with medi-gel, gauze, and ice-pack for her husband, which Dr. Chakwas quickly took and prepared to use...

"This is Ly'enne." The asari officer announced into her radio, as she pressed against the communicator in her ear. "Team two on the Promenade Deck. We're gonna need some medical supplies down here. And uh... keep your eyes open for a human kid running around loose somewhere..."

* * *

><p>"And so... While a rogue group of security personnel have seemingly seized control of the ship, for reasons yet unknown... I find myself now... On my hands and knees... Terrified, as I skulk through darkness... Crawling through the dank, dusty, labyrinth of the ship's ventilation system... Like crawling through the very blood vessels of some great, mechanical being... I can only hope now... for the well being of those who have been taken captive... and hope that they... along with myself... shall survive this horrific ordeal... I will do my best to document all tha..."<p>

"Will you be quiet!" Miranda demanded, with a low, throaty voice, through gritted teeth, as she did her best to turn her head in the narrow, cramped space, and address the irritating blonde reporter, following her in tow. "Are you TRYING to get us found out?!"

"Of course not...!" Cameron whispered back, with her omni-tool lit up on her hand, near her mouth, as she laid flat on her stomach, in the ventilation shaft. "But I am a reporter... It's my job to document things like this... But you're right. I'll do my best to keep it down..."

"Good!" Miranda admonished, as she turned back around. "'Cause next time you'll get my stiletto heel right between your eyes..."

Perhaps it wasn't quite like crawling through the blood vessels of some great mechanical creature, but it was like traversing a long, dark space, much narrower than a small refrigerator box. A physicist, still clad in a fashionable, modern-day tuxedo preceded the group, as he shined his omni-tool flashlight into the pathway choked in darkness â€" sadly an all too familiar setting for this particular physicist.

The black sleeves of his tux, the leggings of his pants, and the breast of his midnight black jacket, were all covered in powdery, gray dust, as the three dragged themselves through the ducts. Much like the Doctor's tux, Miranda Lawson's elegant, bright red evening gown, and Cameron McClane's sky blue dress were both sullied with the

stains of the dust they gathered, as they swept through the vents, like a trio of human feather dusters.

"So what are we doing...?" Cameron asked in a whisper, as they continued to drag themselves forward – the sound of the thin, flimsy metal bending beneath their weight reverberated with every inch they crawled, like the sound someone crushing a metal barrel. "Are we going to try and make it to the escape pods...?"

"Who said anything about escaping?" Miranda retorted in low tone of voice, without actually trying to turn around this time.

"Well then... Where ARE we going...?"

"You're the one that wanted to follow us, remember...?" Miranda replied, sounding somewhat irritated, as she followed closely behind Gordon, dragging herself along, using mostly her elbows and forearms. "So don't worry about where we're going... Just keep up, and let us handle things..."

"If you say so..." Cameron reluctantly conceded, as she moved her omni-tool closer to her mouth, and continued to chronicle the situation.

"Uh, Gordon..." Miranda whispered, as the three continued to traverse the dark, narrow duct. "Gordon...?" She called out again, but was unsuccessful in inciting a response from the intrepid physicist, who just seemed to be gazing all around the vent shaft, in oblivious awe, as he crawled forward.

"Gordon...!" She called a third time, this time in an elevated whisper.

"Hmm...?" Gordon finally responded, as he suddenly snapped himself out of the little trance he had fallen into, and turned his head, as best he could, to acknowledge his newfound biotic beauty. "Oh, sorry about that, I was a little distracted..." He said, as he rolled onto his side, to get a better vantage point for speaking to her, momentarily halting their progression.

"You know, these things are incredible...!" He exclaimed, in a high whisper, as he pointed at the visor generating a band of indigo light over his eyes. "As soon as we got in here, a little display read uh... 'Vision impairment detected. Initializing night vision' or something like that... I don't even really need the flashlight!"

"That's great, Gordon... But... Where are we going...?"

"Oh, I have no idea..." Gordon replied, with an awkward shrug of his shoulders, as he laid on his side, looking back. "I never never know where I'm going when I crawl into these things... But I always manage to get there..." He said, with a slick grin.

"That's none too reassuring, you jerk...!" Miranda replied jokingly, reciprocating his smile, as she shook her head, with a bit of a chuckle.

"Uhm, excuse me...!" Cameron chimed in, in a hushed, yet anxiously elevated tone of voice, from behind Miranda. "How is it that that two

of you are so calm about this...?!"

"Oh, this is nothing...!" Gordon assured, as he rolled back around, and began dragging himself along once more. "Trust me, Miss... We've seen much... MUCH worse!"

"Yes..." Miranda concurred, not fully matching his optimism, as they continued on. "Much worse... Granted, we were a tad better equipped..."

A frightened chill washed over Cameron's body, as she gulped at something in her throat. As she fought against a feeling of nausea settling into the pit of her stomach, she continued to report her account, into her omni-tool microphone.

"So far I have evaded capture..." She whispered "I have placed my faith in a woman who is a member of the team that took down the Reapers... A member of the team belonging to none other, than the legendary Commander Shepard... But I have also placed my faith in a man who undauntedly claims to be a figure straight out of human history... A man who once delivered a besieged Planet Earth, back to the whole of mankind... Even though I find these claims to be unfounded, and wildly incredulous... There is a gallantry about him... A fearlessness... I sincerely hope, for my sake, and for the sake of everyone on-board... That he truly is the man he claims to be... The legendary One Free Man..."

11. Chapter 11: Captain Shon

****Salvation: Episode I â€" The Taking of the Carmenta
Illustria****

Disclaimer: This fan-fiction is part of an episodic series taking place after Salvation: A Half-Life/Mass Effect Universe Fan Fiction, which will lead directly to its sequel, Salvation II: Project Prometheus. These episodes and sequel take place OUTSIDE of the Mass Effect 3 continuity. Characters property of their respective companies, Half-Life created by Valve and Mass Effect created by Bioware.

Chapter 11: Captain Shon

Commander Andrew Kim, the head of the Carmenta Illustria's treacherous security force, studied the datapad in his hands with a grimace, as the lifeless body of Captain Arthur Ryback was heaved out of the room by a pair of guards. As he was carted off, the gaping gash in the side of his head, which left him mildly unrecognizable, oozed with blood, leaving behind a spattered, crimson trail, which led to a thick, viscous pool on the floor.

A number of other armed security officers, in matching uniforms, had entered the bridge, and relieved the Blood Pack armored Teshya and Davix of their duty; keeping the captive bridge crew under control. All of whom still stood, facing the back wall, with their hands now secured behind their backs with sturdy handcuffs.

Kargas, the unmistakable leader of the Blood Pack trio, stood detached and stoically silent at a terminal nestled in a corner against the left wall of the bridge, contemplatively watching the

Promenade Deck surveillance feed. More precisely, he stood studying the five figures sitting in chains, at the fore of the widening sea of lifeforms. And he seemed to release a low, throaty growl, with every breath, as he did so.

"Is this the full casualty list...?" Kim queried, as he studied the datapad in his hand, while conversing with a salarian officer.

"Yes, sir..." The salarian answered, in a disciplined tone. "Fifteen total... Well, uh... fifteen not including the Captain..." He informed, as he looked down at the glossy, red puddle a few feet away.

"Mmm-hmm..." Kim muttered, as he continued to look over the information on the datapad.

"What should we do with the bodies, sir...?"

"The bodies...?" Kim questioned, as he looked back up at the salarian with a furrowed brow, over what seemed such a trivial question. "What do you think you should do with the bodies, Toril...? Throw 'em out the airlock."

"The airlock, sir...?" The salarian reiterated questioningly, as if unsure he had heard correctly — the suggestion causing his head to reel back, and his eyes to open wide in alarm. "All of them? Just like that...?"

"Yes, all of them...!" Kim ordered, with a frustrated groan, and a roll of his eyes. "What's the problem?"

"Well, n-nothing sir... I just..." Toril bowed his head a bit, showing clear signs of intestinal attrition, both on his expression, and in his voice. "Well, to be honest... some of them were friends of mine..."

"Oh gosh, I'm sorry..." Kim replied, in a condescendingly sarcastic tone of voice, exhibiting a fraudulent look of sympathy, as he laid a hand down over the salarian's right shoulder. "But... if you feel that badly about it, you're more than welcome to say a few words on their behalf, while you're dumping them out into space..."

Toril's gaze widened in shock, before he simply gulped, and nodded his head obediently.

"...All of you knew exactly what we were getting into." The fog eyed Commander continued, in a straight, no-nonsense tone of voice, as he pulled his hand off the salarian's shoulder, and waved it in front of him. "And each of you agreed that the payoff would be well worth the risks... Nothing's changed, so don't go losing your nerve now. 'Cause you're either in this for the duration, or your out the airlock with your 'friends'... Got it?"

"Uh... Ahem, yes sir, Commander..." Toril reluctantly acknowledged, with a forceful, apprehensive clearing of his throat. "Got it."

"Good." The appeased Security Commander declared, before looking down, with disgust, at the large puddle of blood, mottled with fleshy masses of various size, pooled near his feet. "And get someone up

here to clean up this mess..."

"Of course, sir. I'll get someone right on it." The salarian replied, as his superior handed back the datapad. "And what would you like us to do with them?" He asked, as he turned and pointed towards the members of the bridge crew, lined up in cuffs against the back wall.

"Them, I want you to secure in the storage room down the hall." The nefarious Commander instructed. "And put a few of our guys on the door. I wanna have them close by in case we need another bargaining chip."

"Yes, sir. Understood."

As the salarian nodded, and prepared to carry out his maligned Commander's dictated orders, a stocky little figure stood near the back of the bridge, beside the entryway, keeping close watch over all that transpired. Just then, out of the corner of his eye, he noticed a small, white object resting in the shadows, under one of the bridge consoles, on the floor. With his curiosity enticed, Tarrik walked over towards the console, striding with a great sense of accomplishment, as the remaining members of the bridge crew were escorted out of the room, single file, in accordance with Kim's instructions.

Tarrik swiveled the seat at the station aside, and peered in to see Captain Ryback's pristine white naval cap, lying face up on the floor — obviously having rolled under the console after Commander Kim knocked it off the Captain's head, when he forcibly pressed his gun against Ryback's temple. Tarrik reached in, picked it up, and began dusting it off, as he examined it in his stubby, little, pincer-like hands. The cap's glossy, black brim was embroidered with twin gilded olive branches. A golden band separated the brim from the soft cloth of the cap. And the front was adorned with a lustrous, golden star stamped upon an ebony backing, and was framed by the words "LYCUNA STAR CRUISES", embossed in gold.

"Hmhmhmhm..." Tarrik let out a low, muffled chuckle, mostly drowned out by the heavy sound of his respirator. "Captain Shon..." He whispered to himself, as he held the cap up in front of him, admiring it as if it were a trophy. Just then, his focus changed. He looked up, past the cap in his hands, and noticed the considerably distraught Leahr'Haan, sitting at the front-most station on the bridge, with his faceplate buried deep into his palms.

"Oh ancestors, what have I done...?" Leahr pleaded to himself, in a hushed, trembling voice. "How could I have ever let myself become part of this...?"

"Well now..." Tarrik's shrill, grating voice suddenly called out, with an enthusiastic glee. "Why so melancholy, my boy...? You should be excited! We now have complete control of the ship, and everyone on it!" He exclaimed, as he placed one hand against Leahr'Haan's back, and waved the Captain's hat around in front of him, with the other, as if trying to paint an invisible picture for the despondent quarian. "Just think... It won't be long before we're lining our pockets with more credits than we could ever count...! Just as I promised."

Tarrik nodded his eager little head, at the scintillating thought, as he daydreamed of vast wealth, and unbridled power. Just then he titled his head, and shrugged a little, as he continued. "Granted that the uh... 'transition' was not as smooth as I had originally calculated. But so rarely do our undertakings turn out exactly as we initially plan. Wouldn't you agree?"

Leahr'Haan lifted his sulking face, out from behind his palms, and turned to look at the contemptuous little volus, with an infuriated glare that managed to pierce through his burgundy hued faceplate. "Excited, Tarrik...? That man just killed the ship's Captain in cold blood-" He declared, pointing a finger around his shoulder, at the oblivious human Commander, still dictating orders behind them. "-and you want me to be... EXCITED?! No...!" He renounced, slamming an angry fist down on the console before him, as he bowed his head and shook it adamantly. "No more...! I want nothing more to do with this, Tarrik...!"

The stout figure looked on, as Leahr'Haan had a sudden, but all too expected, attack of conscience. And he simply released a sigh, masked by the sound of his respirator, as he put his hands on his hips, and shook his head with disappointment.

"Please..." The quarian continued, pleading now in a shaky voice, like a broken man. "Please, just let me off..." He beseeched as he turned his hanging head towards the volus. "I don't wanna be part of this anymore... I've done bad things, Tarrik. But I'm no murderer... Just let me take one of the emergency pods... You can keep your credits, and you'll never hear from me again, I swear...!"

"Oh, Leahr..." Tarrik replied, sounding genuinely sympathetic, as he placed one hand over his heart. "You break my heart, son... Really you do..." He stepped forward to softly pat the quarian on the back. "And I do find your idealistic sense of moral compass refreshing. But I'm afraid you're asking the impossible... You see them...?" He asked, as he pointed a thumb over his shoulder, towards the multiple rogue security officers, and mercenaries fortified in Blood Pack armor.

"Whether you like it or not, you're a witness now..." He explained, with a tinge of scornful cynicism in his voice, causing Leahr's head to slope down even further, in defeat. "And they're not gonna let a witness who can identify everyone involved, just up and leave... Well, not alive anyway..." He said with a scoff. "Or in one piece, for that matter... See, I'm on your side, Leahr. I'm your friend... And frankly, I'm the only reason you're still alive... So relax...!" He insisted, in a carefree tone of voice. "The worst is behind us... Besides, think of the payoff! Would you really rather spend the rest of your life rotting away in some prison...?"

"I don't care about any prison... I don't care about any payoff...! And I don't care what you do with me!" Leahr erupted, as he slammed both closed fists down onto the console. "I won't be a part of this madness any longer...!"

Tarrik bowed his head, and released a long, drawn-out sigh, as he shook it. "You truly disappoint me, Leahr..." He began again, in a low, disapproving tone. "And here I thought you were going to be the quarian that brought that one truly magnificent gift back to your people's homeworld... Tsk... tsk... tsk..." He uttered, with a series

of dental clicks, just as Leahr's head popped up, suddenly enticed.
"Guess I was wrong..."

Tarrik turned, giving his back to the quarian, and slowly began to waddle away, as Leahr swiveled his seat around, with great urgency.

"Wa-wait...!" The quarian pleaded, extending a hand out towards Tarrik, and causing him to stop in his tracks, as he listened. "Back to my people's homeworld...? What are y...? You mean back to the flotilla..."

"Oh..." Tarrik uttered, as if greatly surprised by the remark, as he slowly turned back around. "No... You hadn't heard...?"

"Heard what...?"

"Well, this is awkward..." The volus continued, behind the hissing sound of his respirator, as he crossed one arm, and draped his opposite hand across the area just below his mouth piece. "You see... One of the results of the war against the Reapers, and the ensuing victory... was evidently peace between the quarians and the geth..."

"Bosh'tet!" Leahr exclaimed, as he waved a disbelieving hand before him. "You lie!"

"Look it up for yourself, if you don't believe me..." Tarrik advised, as he innocently turned his hands up, and shrugged his shoulders. "Last I heard, the geth were even helping the quarians rebuild, and resettle Rannoch."

As suggested, Leahr immediately swiveled around in his seat, and went to work, punching a blistering series of keystrokes into his own, portable computer.

"Keywords... News... Rannoch... Quarians... Geth... Peace..." He whispered to himself, as he input the search criteria. After typing the final word, and initializing the search, he suddenly held his breath, as his eyes opened wide in amazement, and disbelief, at the list of headlines that appeared before him.

THE TREATY OF THE VIEL: THE FIRST STRIDE TOWARDS PEACE BETWEEN ORGANICS AND SYNTHETICS

GETH WELCOME CREATORS BACK TO RANNOCH WITH OPEN ARMS.

WE NEVER WANTED WAR WITH THE CREATORS, SAYS GETH.

TODAY OUR CHILDREN SEE THE WORLD OF OUR ANCESTORS, SAYS QUARIAN.
TOMORROW THEIR CHILDREN WILL BREATHE ITS AIR WITHOUT MASKS.

A FLEET OF MIGRANTS NO LONGER!

Leahr'Haan released the gasping breath, he'd forgotten he was holding in, as a chill washed over his entire body. His heart swelled in his chest, and his eyes glazed over with tears, behind his mask. "Can it be true...?!" He whispered to himself, as he beheld the information on the screen. "By the ancestors, can it be true?!"

"Heh, I mean it Leahr..." Tarrik interjected, with a snickering laugh. "You've really gotta learn to get out of the workshop more often. But uh... I guess none of that matters now..." He said, as he gave his back to the quarian once more, and shrugged nonchalantly. "Doesn't look like you'll be making it home after all..."

"Wait...!" Leahr pleaded, as he swung himself back around. "...I'll do it."

"You'll do WHAT?" Tarrik demanded in a cold, emotionless voice, as he turned his head, and glared up at Leahr.

"Anything..." Leahr'Haan proclaimed, submitting himself wholly to an almost Faustian pact. "Whatever you want... Keelah Se'lai, I have to see the homeworld someday..."

"I know you do, Leahr..." Tarrik replied, purporting to be genuinely sympathetic. "And you will... But! Now that I have your utter, and complete subordination, there are a few things I'd like you to do for me..."

"Whatever you say..." The quarian machinist acknowledged, suddenly feeling a sickness in the pit of his stomach, as he hung his head down, with his entire body slumped forward.

"First off, you may now activate your mechs in the Loading Bay." Tarrik ordered, with an accompanying hiss from his suit's respirator, causing Leahr to raise his head, and pay close attention. "Distribute them as evenly as you can, across the ship, and put them on roving patrol on all decks. Should they find any stragglers, I want the mechs to escort them to the Promenade Deck. And should they refuse..." He paused for a moment, before continuing on. "Subject them to immediate termination..."

"Well... You know, actually... I did install a number of NON-lethal counter-measures into their arsenals... If you want, I could simply..."

"No!" Tarrik adamantly refuted, quickly cutting the quarian off. "No more chances. After that little fiasco in the hostage area, they get one verbal warning, followed by immediate lethal recourse. Is that clear?"

Leahr'Haan sighed, as his head sank once more, before speaking. "...Crystal."

"Good." Tarrik affirmed, as he suddenly took the Captain's naval cap, which he had still been clutching in his hand, and eagerly began affixing it to his rather bulbous head. "Then the next thing I need you to do is put me through across the entire ship..." He said, as he finished adjusting the cap, and left it sitting firmly upon his brow.

He tilted his head back a bit, as if wanting to see the cap resting where he laid it. He then attempted to poise himself with the noble guise of a stalwart Captain — standing up straight, with a broad stance, shoulders up, and head held high. At least as high as a volus of his stature could hold it.

"I think it's about time I address my loyal passengers..."

* * *

><p>Inside a darkened closet, bathed in only the dim, jade light given off by the unlocked door's holographic panel, a grimy mop rests inside a dingy bucket... An unkempt, old VI vacuum cleaner lies in disrepair... And rows of cleaning agents and materials sit upon shelves lining the inner wall, as a muffled thud was suddenly heard... Just then, it resounded again, sounding louder this time, as something began to push against a black, metallic maintenance panel on the floor, trying to force it open. All of a sudden, with one final, forceful push, the panel swung open, and two stately dressed figures emerged from underneath...<p>

"Whew...!" Shepard groaned, exhaling a hefty breath, as his head popped out of the maintenance hatch " his arm still holding the metallic panel up. Like a pair of Jack-in-the-Boxes squeezed into a tight spot, John and Tali both rose out of the dark hole in the floor together, about chest high. "It's hot down there...!"

"You never complained before..." Tali replied, in a playfully seductive tone, as she lightly brushed a bit of the dust off the right shoulder of his tuxedo jacket.

"Heh..." Shepard chuckled, before he replied. "Well, when I said this cruise would be an opportunity for us to spend a little quality time together... This isn't exactly what I had in mind..."

"...Sometimes I think we can't catch a break." He added, as Tali pulled herself out of the hatch, and sat on the outer edge, with her feet still dangling into the hole.

Her shimmering, lavender dress, and silky, ivory white gloves, now painted in the emerald light from the door's panel, were covered in tufts of gray dust, and splotches of black grease. In the same way, Shepard's raven black tuxedo was begrimed by blots of the ashy powder.

"Do you think they've cleared the decks yet...?" Tali asked, as she turned, and looked towards the door.

"It's likely..." The Commander acknowledged. "I don't hear any more commotion..."

"Keelah, of all the bosh'tet things that could happen...!" Tali exclaimed, in a sudden outburst of frustration, bowing her head, and shaking it, as she drew her hand across the forehead area of her faceplate. "And I was having the most wonderful time I've ever had..."

"Yeah..." Shepard supplemented, with a sigh, as he hung his head a bit, and shook it. "And just as I was..." Suddenly he stopped, as he tried to choke back his words, and think of something else to say. "...Was..."

"What...?" Tali asked, her curiosity beguiled, as she looked down at Shepard, still standing chest deep in the hole before her, with a sudden nervousness on his face.

"No, I mean... I was having the time of my life too... And then all this had to happen..."

"No..." Tali refuted, as her eyes narrowed on Shepard, trying to dissect his expression. "No, up on the observation deck... Before the impact... You were about to ask me something... Something important... What was it?"

"...Tali." John hesitantly began, with a disheartened look in his eyes, as he leaned back against the inside edge of the hatch, and awkwardly started rubbing the back of his neck. "Not here..." He stated, as he looked around the tiny room, saturated in green light. "This... This isn't how-"

"Testing...!" The echoing sound of a shrill voice, accompanied by a deafening, high-pitched buzz of microphone feedback, suddenly reverberated within the tiny room, throughout the whole deck, and across the entire ship, immediately cutting Shepard off, and causing both of them to look up towards the ceiling, and pay the utmost attention.

"...esting... Hel... Is th... ing on...?" The voice, peppered with loud crackles of static interference, garnered the full regard of the physicist, the operative, and the reporter, crawling through the ventilation system, forcing them to stop, and listen closely.

"...was working earlier...!" The voice admonished, as a large, theater-sized, holographic screen projected itself above the Promenade Deck, near the ceiling, exhibiting a snowy, distorted image, slowly coming into focus.

"Hello...? Testing... Test... Oh, wait! Wait! There, it's working...!" Tarrik declared, as his visage fully materialized upon the screen, with his voice now ringing forth with crystal clarity, and the hiss of a respirator.

"Good evening, my lovely, affluent passengers...!" He greeted, as the handcuffed combatants, and amassing sea of frightened hostages all turned to gaze up at the ominous presence of the giant volus on the screen, wearing a pristine white naval cap upon his arrogant, unworthy brow. "This is your new Captain speaking...!"

"...Judging by the sound of that breathing-" Gordon whispered back towards Miranda, as he rested on his side, listening. "I'd say that was either a volus... Or a stubby Darth Vader..."

"...What's a dark vader?"

"Shhh..." Miranda uttered, quieting the intrigued reporter, as the voice began again.

"As you've no doubt guessed, I am the one responsible for making the subtle alterations to your travel itinerary..." Tarrik announced, addressing his audience with an ostentatious sense of arrogance, and grandeur.

"Now, I think we all got off on the wrong foot, before... And I do apologize for that bit of ugliness a little earlier..." He tenderly stated, placing a fraudulently sympathetic hand over his heart, as

the hostages looked on at his visage on the screen. "Even though I personally abhor violence, it is a regrettable truth that extreme measures must sometimes be taken..."

"But all that aside, I wonder if perhaps we can start over... My name is Tarrik Shon. And as I said, I will be your acting Captain for the remainder of this trip..."

"Well...!" He exclaimed cheerfully, as he clasped his grubby hands together, and rubbed them zealously. "Now that we're all friends, there are a few... provisos that I must now acquaint you with... So pay close attention-!" He declared, holding an enthusiastic finger up, as if he were about to deliver a public service announcement. "-Because the following could save your lives...!"

"First of all, I ask that you excuse your new travel accommodations..." He continued, as the passengers looked around, from their spots seated on the hard floor, at the militia of guards covering the exits, and patrolling the area, with their weapons brandished. "We do need to keep an eye on you, after all..."

"Second... and this one is for all of you stragglers out there, that may be hiding away in the ship's many nooks, and crannies, and niches, and cubbyholes..."

A crooked grin came over Shepard's face as he listened, leaning back against the interior of the hatch, with his elbows resting on the utility closet floor, on which Tali was sitting, beside him.

"Should any of you get the brilliant idea of making an escape via the life-pods... I would strongly reconsider, as I'm sure you will find this rather impossible... All communications have been terminated, and all life pods and emergency hatches have been locked down... There is no way off this ship..."

"With that said, I think we can drop the formalities, and get down to business..." Tarrik asserted "his voice suddenly fading into a cold, emotionless tone.

"We are in control, ladies and gentlemen... Understand that now... And as long as you behave yourselves... Do exactly as you're told... And as long as we can avoid any further... 'incidents'... like the one we had earlier... Then you have my word that no harm will come to any of you... All of this will just become another memorable experience you can regale your grandchildren with, one day... But...! Should you fail to comply... Or become unruly and disorderly... Well, I just can't guarantee your safety..."

"Now in a few moments, several of the armed men and women around you are going to come by with duffel bags. We would like you to please open your hearts, and drop anything of value you may have on you, into those bags..."

The mere mention of this drew a smile on the faces of most of the armed malefactors, as they began cockily nodding their heads.

"We'll take gold, jewelry, credit chits, priceless heirlooms... Really any precious gems, or metals you may have on your person..." He informed, speaking with the cynical quirkiness of someone

completely in love with the sound of their own voice. "If you're not sure something you have is valuable enough for us to want... Drop it in anyway, because it probably is..."

"He sounds like a pompous ass...!" Shepard asserted, with a look of disgust reflected in his eyes, as he and Tali continued to listen. "Even by volus standards..."

"Now as we near our destination, someone will come around, and ask for the passcodes to those big, big, bank accounts we know you have...!" He declared on the screen, with a child-like enthusiasm, as he clenched his hands into fists in front of him, as if grabbing hold of some great, invisible trophy.

"After we've got your valuables, and the credits from your accounts... And as soon as we dock with our destination... You'll all be free to go...! Just like that... After all, what's a few material possessions, weighed against the rest of your lives, am I right?"

"So... To recap. We are in control... There is no way off this ship... Behave... And give us your money..." Tarrik explained, finishing, as he started turning away from the camera, before abruptly stopping and turning back. "Oh, and... one final thing..."

"I do hope this experience won't sour your opinion of the Lycuna Cruise Company, itself..." He stated, pleadingly clasping his hands together together, in front of his chest. "After all, they have been operating for over five-hundred years... Plus, I hear they've got top-notch security, hehehehe..." He declared, as he broke out into a snide, devilish snicker, and waved good-bye to the camera. "So long for now..."

"Sure you couldn't have laid it on a little thicker there, Tarrik...?" The fog-eyed Security Commander remarked sarcastically, as the audacious volus summoned the hovering, holographic camera drone back into his omni-tool, on the ship's bridge.

"Commander Kim..." Tarrik presumptuously retorted, with a high and mighty tone of voice. "With your oratory skills, I'm sure you couldn't go thirty seconds before simply giving up, and shooting someone else to get your point across..."

"Hey, it worked, didn't it...?" Kim replied, taking on a snide, crooked grin.

"Yes, quite..."

The one-eyed Commander shrugged carelessly, and turned away from Tarrik as he paced around the bridge. As he pulled a small, silvery case out of his pant pocket, and split it open to remove a single cigarette, he suddenly took note of the detached, imperturbable Blood-Pack leader, perpetually gazing up at the surveillance monitor in the corner, with a dissecting eye. Kargas stood with his arms crossed, and a focused stare, as something was clearly enveloping his thoughts.

"Too much HV can rot your brain, you know...?" Kim declared jokingly, as he stepped up beside the krogan, lightly tapping his cigarette on

his metallic case, to tamp down the tobacco in the paper tube. Kargas however, seemed completely content without placating the head of security with a response. Instead he simply continued to pore over the screen in stoic silence.

"Why don't you relax...?" Kim suggested in a bit of a muddled voice, as he placed the cigarette between his lips, and raised a flaming silver lighter to it, momentarily splashing a mask of vibrant orange onto his face. "Take a load off... We've got some food on the way. Some booze..."

"The ship's ours, Karg..." He continued, pulling the cigarette from his lips with an exhalation of smoke. "Those assholes aren't gonna do a god damn thing."

"...You humans amuse me." The krogan responded, with indifference, as he continued to observe the frightened assembly in the Promenade Deck. "Always so quick to assume a situation is going completely in your favor..."

"Uh... Unless I'm mistaken... I believe it is...!"

"Haven't you, even for one moment, stopped to wonder who these people are...?" Kargas demanded admonishingly, as he finally turned his rigid stare onto Kim. "Or how they managed to completely decimate fifteen of your men, without so much as breaking a sweat...?!"

"Hey, my guys aren't soldiers, Kargas!" Kim retorted, with an escalated tone. "And they aren't trained mercenaries either... To most of 'em this was just another job, until I came along and opened their eyes... They're not soldiers of fortune, they're security guards... But they're loyal, and they follow orders! I've painstakingly hand picked them myself, to make sure of that...!"

"That's not what I'm talking about, Commander!" Kargas shot back, as the officer took another drag of his cigarette. "What I mean is look at them! Why is there a krogan here...? Our kind don't particularly have a taste for... frilly, dainty cruises as a fun past-time..." He proclaimed, sneering with disgust. "We prefer the taste of a good kill, and a hard fight..."

"Well, you may not believe this, Karg-" The Commander started again, with a condescending tinge in his voice, releasing a puff of smoke with every breath, as he pulled the lit cigarette from his lips once more. "-but we get krogan all the time... People that THINK they're important tend to bring 'em along as bodyguards."

"And what of the geth...?!" He demanded, as he turned back towards the screen, and focused on the slightly static mired visage of the captive Legion. "Do you get geth all the time too...?"

"No, but with that stupid new treaty between them and the quarians, I wouldn't be surprised if by this time next month, half of Lycuna's customers were geth...! At least until they turn on us again..." Commander Kim remarked with a roll of his eyes, and a smack of his lips. "...Which you fucking know they will."

"Mmmrrrr..." Kargas released a deep, throaty growl, under his breath, like a dragon preparing to breath fire. "I don't like it." He

adamantly asserted. "There is something... familiar about them, that just doesn't sit right with me... It is... unnerving..."

"I'm telling you it's nothing..." Kim reassured, as he replaced the cigarette between his lips, and turned to walk away. "...You really should learn to relax."

As the uniformed Head of Security strolled away, leaving a thin trail of smoke in his wake, Kargas' deep, predatory eyes remained unwavering from the screen before him. Every so often they'd flicker for a glance towards one of the other security feeds, from the mostly empty areas across the vast ship. But it was never for more than a second or two, before he drove his pupils right back to the team of five constrained figures, sitting placidly at the front of a sea of hostages.

"I'll relax when they're dead..."

12. Chapter 12: Stragglers and Delinquents

****Salvation: Episode I â€" The Taking of the Carmenta
Illustria****

Disclaimer: This fan-fiction is part of an episodic series taking place after Salvation: A Half-Life/Mass Effect Universe Fan Fiction, which will lead directly to its sequel, Salvation II: Project Prometheus. These episodes and sequel take place OUTSIDE of the Mass Effect 3 continuity. Characters property of their respective companies, Half-Life created by Valve and Mass Effect created by Bioware.

Chapter 12: Stragglers and Delinquents

"That arrogant little volus son of a bitch...!" Jacob sneered, through gritted teeth, as he sat helplessly on the Promenade Deck floor. "When this is over, I'm gonna yank his tubes out one by one, and beat the ever loving shit out of 'em...!"

"Yeah, well get in line..." Garrus replied, with an scowl, at the center of his teammates, as they sat on the floor, with their hands cuffed behind their backs. "On second thought..." He uttered, as his scowl suddenly grew into a diabolical grin. "We'll do more damage if we work together..."

"Heh, I'll bring the beer..." Jacob replied, the look in his eyes reflecting his wanton intentions.

"I'll bring the sledgehammer..." Garrus added, matching Jacob's wicked gleam.

The five of them; Garrus, Jacob, Legion, Mordin, and Grunt, all sat on the floor, with their hands securely fastened behind their backs, as the murmuring sea of lifeforms continued to grow behind them. Most of them were just shoved into the pile, and told to sit down, and shut up, as any conformity to the agglomeration was lost long ago. There were no rows, or columns. It wasn't like the seating arrangements at a stadium or concert hall. All it was, was a bundled mass of life â€" bipeds, quadrupeds, vertebrates, and invertebrates, all stuck in the same dismally bleak situation. There was a myriad of

them now, possibly numbering in thousands, given that the ship's capacity was upwards of two-thousand.

Virtually all that once was the Casino floor was thronged with life. Some had been brought in in nightgowns, and sleepwear. Others in dinner suits, and gala attire. And others still, in nothing but swim trunks and bathing suits, as they were hauled straight out of the pools. And many continued to be herded in, from the deck's various entrances. But where it once was a clambering flood of bystanders pouring in, like the water from a collapsed dam, it was now just a trickle, as the majority of the ship's passengers already waited in captivity.

"Get off me you low-life pieces of varren shit!" A rebellious young turian, dressed in a security officer's uniform snarled, as he was dragged into the deck, kicking and thrashing, with his hands cuffed behind his back, while being restrained by two separate guards, a salarian, and another turian, wearing the exact same uniforms.

"I've had just about all the guff I'm gonna take from you, kid!" The turian admonished, as they forcibly dragged their former co-worker to the seated crowd of detainees.

"Well let me go then!" The rookie demanded, with an incensed look, and an intrepid resolve, fighting against his captors every step of the way. "Get these cuffs off me, and we'll settle this! I ain't afraid of y-UMPH!" He grunted loudly, as the turian suddenly careened a hard jab into his gut, cutting him off, and causing him to let fourth of sputter of coughs.

"Learn when to shut up, kid!" His assailant ordered, as the young turian stood hunched over, coughing, and gasping for the air he had knocked out of him.

"Here, we got a front row seat for you!" The corrupt turian added, as he took hold of the back of the rookie's pant waist, and collar, like a person preparing to throw an unruly drunk out of a bar. "Right next to the other delinquents!" He said, as both he, and the salarian charged forward, and lunged the ex-guard forth, causing him to stumble and roll under his own, uncontrolled momentum, and land on the floor just in front of Garrus and Mordin.

"Ack-Assholes!" The young turian yelled out, in a gravelly, throaty voice, still coughing a little, as he tried to roll onto his back, and sit up.

The mechanical components in Legion's head motored back and forth, as his optic sensors observed this strange development, and similarly, the others looked on with an eager, albeit suspicious confusion.

"Let me guess..." Jacob was the first to speak up, as the turian steadied himself, and slumped down, sitting adjacently to the combat team. "You wanted a bigger cut...?"

"Huh...?" The rookie replied, breathing a little heavily, and still somewhat disoriented, as he turned to Jacob. "Bigger cut...?"

"Punitive action, perhaps..." Mordin conjectured, as his eyes

assessed the young rookie, and the possible reasons for his predicament. "May have been caught, as humans say, 'skimming off the top...'"

"What's your story, kid...?" Garrus queried, forthright. "Did you suddenly grow a conscience, and decide to go against the 'master plan'...?"

"Grow a conscience...?!" The young turian replied questioningly, still in a somewhat befuddled state, as he raised an eyebrow. "I-I didn't even know there was a master plan...! I didn't know anything about this..." He informed, as he took a long look around at all the despondent, frightened faces of the passengers sitting around him, and at the armed, uniformed drones patrolling the area like soldiers in a concentration camp. "I'm new here... I just started this week..."

"Phew..." Jacob snickered a little, as he shook his head, with a sympathetic grin. "Talk about a rough first week..."

"Tell me about it..." The rookie remarked, exhaling a long, drawn-out sigh, as he bowed, and shook his head dolefully.

"The name's Zdrawkoh, by the way..." He informed, raising his head back up, and looking over the five figures sitting closest to him. "Zdrawkoh Y'kupets."

"Zuh... Zehd... what...?" Jacob stuttered a bit, as he tried to pronounce the peculiar turian name, before simply giving up.

"Zeh-draw-koh." He enunciated, considerably slower. "But you can just me Zee... Most humans do."

"I got a cousin named Zdrawkoh..." Garrus chimed in. "Out in the Palavenian Outer Colonies."

"Yeah, that's where I'm from too...!" Zee replied enthusiastically.

Suddenly, while his attention was on Garrus, his eyes narrowed.

"Wait a minute..." He uttered, as he furrowed his brow pensively, and moved his head closer, as if trying to decipher something about the older turian's face. "Aren't you..." He stopped as his eyes suddenly widened, and he reeled his head back in disbelief "â€" stuttering with mouth agape. "Y-You-You are! You're Garrus Vakarian!"

Garrus grinned and gave a subtle shake of his head, as he chuckled lightly, under his breath.

"Oh, my spirits...! It really is you...! You're... You're my hero, you know that?!"

"Great kid... I'm flattered." Garrus acknowledged, sounding none too excited, but still exhibiting a cordial smile. "I'd be happy to sign an autograph, but as you can see..." He stopped, leaned forward and jingled the chain of the cuffs behind him.

"Oh yeah... Uh-I mean, no... Of course..." Zee fumbled with his words, as he continued, looking up at Garrus with an awestruck admiration. "I understand, but wow...! I mean, it's really you...! This is incredible!"

With a crooked smirk on his face, Jacob turned to Mordin, rolled his eyes, and shook his head. Mordin in turn simply reciprocated with a nonchalant, carefree shrug of his shoulders, as the young turian continued to fawn over his idol.

"You have no idea how GREAT it is to meet you! I mean, you're a legend...! The way you stopped that attack on the Citadel a few years back. And now stopped the Reapers, and saved Earth and the uh..." He paused his gushing momentarily, as he turned his eyes towards the ceiling, and searched his memory for the right word. "The... The vorginots...?" He stated dubiously. "Err... Those green, three-armed aliens that built that big machine."

"The Vortigaunts." Jacob offered up.

"Yeah, those guys...!"

"Heh, well I appreciate the sentiment, kid..." Garrus chuckled mildly, as he started again. "But I think you've got your information a little crossed. Shepard's really the one that did all that. Though to be fair, there's no way he could've, without my help..." He continued, taking a somewhat cocky tone. "That much is true..."

"Really...?" Zee questioned, raising a skeptic eyebrow. "Hmph... I always thought it was the other way around..." He uttered, as he stopped, and pensively starred off into space for a moment, before turning back to Garrus, and continuing. "Well, anyway... What are you doing on this ship...?"

Without waiting for an answer, he leaned in closer to Garrus, as if preparing to share a protected secret.

"You're here as part of some... covert strike-force, right...?" He asked in a whisper, causing Garrus to raise his eyebrows, with a dubious look. "You heard what was going down, so you planted yourselves on-board... Now you're just waiting for the right time to make your move, am I right...?"

"Well hey, listen... If there's anything I can do to help, count me in!" He insisted, raising his volume just a tad, as his eagerness got the better of him. "I'd love to get a little payback on these guys..."

"Well I'm sorry to disappoint you, kid... But we're not part of any strike-force..."

Garrus' words quickly etched a disheartened look on Zee's expression, as the enthusiasm in his eyes melted into a grimace.

"We're just on vacation..." Garrus continued, shaking his head around in a cynical fashion. "The only move we're planning on making right now is sitting tight, or else risk getting more hostages killed..."

"Ah..." Zee replied in a dry, deadpan tone of voice, as he nodded and hung his head a bit " understanding the predicament, but not favoring it any more. "Well, this doesn't bode well..."

* * *

><p>On one of the ship's exquisite first class passenger decks, a vacationing Commander, attired in a dusty black tuxedo, pressed himself against the inside wall of the small hallway leading away from the janitor's closet that had previously provided them concealment. Tali stood beside him, as he slowly peeked his head around the corner, peering for any signs of life, or more importantly, signs of the maleficent security personnel. The main hallway was lined on both sides, from end to end, with the individual doors to the luxury staterooms. Each and every single door was drawn open, and the light spilling out from inside the rooms wrought an illuminated runway upon the cashmere, chestnut colored, carpet " like the catwalk at a fashion show.<p>

In the distance, Shepard could make out shadows dancing on the floor, from inside a couple of the staterooms further down the hall. And with the floating shadows, he could make out faint laughter, and conversation. Turning his attention upwards, he then took note of the tiny security camera, no bigger than a matchbox, mounted on the ceiling just above him - panning left and right, with a clear field of view of all that transpired within the corridor.

"The hallway looks clear..." He informed Tali, as he retracted himself, and turned to face her. "It sounds like there's a few guards down there. Nothing we can't handle, but it doesn't seem like any of these guys know we're on-board yet. The longer we can stay incognito, the better... For us, and for the passengers..."

"I think we can skirt that camera, if we're careful..." He continued, as took another quick glance at the active surveillance camera above his head.

"Hmm..." Tali muttered contemplatively, as she placed a curled finger over the mouth-piece of her faceplate. "We may not have to..." She said, as she brought up her omni-tool and began punching away at the keys. "There isn't TOO much I can do without my cyber-warfare mods... But it looks like a mesh wireless link-up. I th...ink I might be able to tap into the network. But I'm not sure..." She explained, sounding rather skeptical of her own abilities, as she worked away, punching an array of keys into her illuminated omni-tool.

A snowy screen materialized itself, floating in the air, just above her hologram encased forearm, as she fervently continued her attempted foray into the ship's surveillance system.

"Well, if there's anyone that can do it, it's you..." Shepard reassured.

"...It'd be no problem if I'd brought my Nexus." Tali replied, as she continued her work, imperceptibly shaking her head, as she found the task a bit more daunting than she expected. "But I didn't anticipate having to override systems, or infiltrate networks..." She asserted " the timbre of her voice sounding increasingly frustrated. "In fact, I don't know why I didn't bring it...! You're a Spectre, we're authorized...! From now on John, wherever we go, all our combat gear

come with us...!"

"Oh, yeah...!" The Commander replied, chuckling under his breath, with a playful sarcasm. "Dinner and dancing with a full arsenal strapped to our backs... I can't imagine anything awkward about that..."

Just then, the static on Tali's screen began to dissipate, and the screen itself became segmented – exhibiting a grid of multiple security feeds from various areas of the ship. Most of which were now desolate and abandoned.

"Got it...!" She exclaimed, holding her arm up, as the image finished manifesting itself with crystal clarity. "Keelah, I'm good...!"

"Yes you are..." Shepard affirmed, sounding thoroughly impressed, as he stepped up beside her, looking on at the screen.

"It looks like they've cleared most of the decks..." She informed, as she began using a swiping motion across the screen, with her free hand, to cycle through the various feeds. Most areas of the ship only showed a few scattered guards, doing a sweep for any remaining civilians. The bars and clubs were vacated. The concert halls, and the restaurants, the pool areas, and the shops had all been abandoned in haste. And where the Carmenta Illustria once was a bustling hub of frolic, luxury, and indulgence, it was now just a lifeless, devoid construct, of barren halls, and dark intentions.

"Look...!" Tali entreated, as she stopped on one of the screens. "There's everyone in the Casino Deck." She declared, when she noticed the heavily congested deck. "Just like the guard said."

"Yeah..." Shepard concurred, with his eyes narrowed, zeroing in on the tiny figures at the head of the crowd. "Hey, can you zoom in on this?"

"Sure."

With a swift, proficient wave of her fingers, Tali immediately singled out the window in question, and brought it into full view over her omni-tool, zooming in on the six bound figures in front.

"Look at those slackers...!" Tali remarked with a humorous sarcasm, as she watched them sitting unharmed, helplessly on the floor, with their hands cuffed behind their backs. They each seemed to be making small talk among themselves to pass the tedium. One turian in particular, vested in security garb, seemed to be chatting up a storm with Garrus, who appeared a bit aloof, just listening.

"I guess it was too much to hope for that they wouldn't get themselves caught..." Shepard added, somewhat disconcerted. "Although..." He continued, somewhat intrigued, as he took a closer look at the lineup of his teammates.

"No Miranda, or Dr. Freeman..." Tali supplemented, finishing his thought for him.

"Nope..." He acknowledged, crossing his arms, with a crooked smirk on his face, and a wicked gleam in his eyes. "Now, where do you suppose

those two could be...?"

"I dunno... Haven't heard any explosions..." She replied, placing her hand casually on her hip, as she looked away from the screen being generated by her omni-tool. "Though frankly we haven't blown anything up yet, either..."

"Hey, give it time...!" Shepard said, encouragingly. "The night's still young... But onto more pressing matters... What can you do about that security camera...?"

"Well, I could disable it." Tali explained candidly, as she turned her attention back to the screen, and went to work. "But that would send up a pretty big red flag. I got a better idea..." She assured, as she continued manipulating various keys on her omni-tool. "From what I can tell, this deck, and the Riviera Deck are virtually identical. Probably being because they're both for the first class, Deluxe Luxury Suites. And since there's not a lot of movement on either floor, I can mirror the feed from the Riviera Deck, making it seem as though they're still two completely separate feeds..." She explained, as her keystrokes suddenly slowed to a stop.

"And... Done!" She exclaimed as she punched in one, final, adamant key, before turning back towards John, proudly holding her head high.

"That's it...?" He beckoned, with a bit of a stunned countenance on his face, at how masterfully she handled the situation.

"That's it." Tali cheerfully assured. "Now anyone looking at surveillance for this deck will instead be looking at the feed for the Riviera Deck, and be none the wiser."

"...Have I ever told you I love it when you get technical?"

* * *

><p>"So, what else do we know so far?" Miranda queried in a whisper which echoed around the long, metallic vent shaft, as the three continued to drag themselves through it, on their stomachs.<p>

"We know that whoever's in-charge of this whole damn thing is either a volus... or someone with severe respiratory problems..." Gordon replied, without actually turning to look back. They were crawling at a feverish pace now, as Cameron trailed along, struggling to keep up â€" each of their faces now blotted with dusty soot. Gordon's countenance had long since faded from a look of optimism, to one of determination, and resolve, as he held a tightened brow behind his holographic lenses.

"Right..." Miranda concurred in a hushed voice. "He made a mention of ugliness... And having to take extreme measures..."

"Sounds to me like a nice way of saying somebody's already been executed..." He affirmed, as his tone suddenly grew angrier, and his sneer more irate. Suddenly, he stopped his advance, nearly causing Miranda to bump into the back of his dress shoe heels. "You don't think it could be one of ours, do you...?" He questioned, as he turned over a bit â€" a tinge of worry now bleeding through the determination in his eyes.

"I don't know..." Miranda answered softly, dubiously bowing and shaking her head. "All we've seen so far is the ship's security team gone rogue... I can't imagine them being able to get the better of... Well, any of us... But someone definitely boarded the ship... That could mean mercenaries, or pirates... Or anyone..."

"Hmm..." Gordon muttered through clenched lips, as he leaned down on his elbow, resting on his side. "He said something about a destination... Any idea where they could be planning to take us...?"

"It could be anywhere." Miranda pointedly informed, with a fairly certain look in her eyes. "But if I had to venture a guess, I'd say somewhere out in the Terminus Systems."

"The Terminus Systems...?!" Cameron proclaimed worriedly, in an inadvertent outburst, into her omni-tool microphone, as she held it out in front of her, trying to definitively capture the full testimonies of the pair she traveled with.

"It'd be the most logical destination." Miranda elaborated, keeping her voice down to a high whisper. "It's far outside Council Jurisdiction. And none of the Citadel Races would dare risk sending anyone after the ship for fear of triggering a war with the batarians."

"So then we've just gotta make sure this ship doesn't make it to a mass relay..." Gordon determined, his eyes drifting a bit, as he appraised the scope of the situation in his mind. "How could we do that...?"

"Well, we could always try assaulting the bridge..." Miranda offered up, with a hint of cynicism in her voice, as she crossed one arm under her chest, and rested her head against her opposite palm, like someone relaxing on a beach. "But without your armor, my biotic amps, or weapons, we'd be at a major disadvantaged... But what else is new...?"

"Hmm..." Gordon muttered, as he turned to face forward, shifting himself back into a prone position, as his eyes began to flicker back and forth. After a contemplative moment, he stopped, and turned his head to look back over his shoulder. "What about the engine room...? Could we maybe stop the ship from there?"

"...Hypothetically, yes." Miranda began again, somewhat hesitantly. "But again, there's no real way of knowing how much resistance we'd run into. Or how big of an incursion force we're dealing with... Given the size of the ship, and the number of passengers on-board, I'd anticipate a sizable contingent."

"Wait-wait-wait...!" The dutiful reporter tagging along suddenly spoke up, with alarm, and agitation. "Are the two of you actually talking about attacking these people...?"

"Do you have a better idea...?" Miranda asked, with a bit of an irked tone, not actually turning to look back at the questioning reporter, instead just rolling her eyes a bit.

"Yes!" She exclaimed in an inadvertent outburst, before immediately

covering her mouth with her hands, when she realized how loud she had been. "...Yes...!" She reiterated nervously, in a soft, low voice, as she pulled her hands away from her mouth, but still keeping them hovering in front. "Stay here, and wait to be rescued... We're safe in here...!"

"And just who do you think is going to come and rescue us, hmm?" Miranda demanded, in a low, rigid tone, as she turned her head to look back over her shoulder. "How long do you think we'll be... 'safe' here? You heard the hijackers. Communications have been cut. By the time anyone figures out something's wrong, we could be on the far side of the Attican Traverse..." She asserted, pausing momentarily, as she looked forward, bit down on her clenched lips, and shook her head.

"You're afraid... I get that." She sympathized, looking back once more, as she continued on. "But it was your stupid choice to follow us... And this is what we do... So when the shooting starts, just keep your head down, and stay out of our way... You'll be alright." She affirmed reassuringly, as she turned back towards the front, before feeling the need to add one final sentiment, with a dubious look in her eyes. "...Probably."

"Somebody has to do something, Miss..." Gordon supplemented with a hefty, frustrated sigh, as he continued along, dragging himself forward on his elbows and knees, with the two ladies once again in tow. "Might as well be us..."

"...And so on we go..." Cameron whispered into her mic, with a shaky, troubled voice, while following along through the reverberant, metallic shaft. "Further and further into the darkness... I can feel my skin crawl with a ceaseless barrage of shudders... I don't know if it's the frigid air in these ducts that chills me... Or a terror of the unknown... I have no idea what is happening beyond this cramped, suppressive aluminum corridor... Nor, do I know what fate awaits me... I ask myself... Is it cowardice to feel fear, while in the presence of the fearless...? Is it selfish to want to remain hidden, while those I travel with devise a plan to save the hundreds, perhaps thousands, that have been so ruthlessly taken hostage... I tell myself that it is, but that I'm only human... But then so are they... And I can't help but admire their chivalry... Even if I am to get caught in the middle of it... So, whatever happens ladies and gentlemen... Should I perish, but these records survive... Know that I had the rare privilege to witness true heroism at work..."

* * *

><p>Close by to the cordoned off conglomerate of hostages, sitting restlessly in what used to be the Promenade Deck Casino, a man laid upon the floor in a tranquil slumber, with a mound of pillows at his back, and a large patch of white badges affixed to the rear of his skull. Beside him, a woman with faded, black streaks of mascara running down her cheeks, where the tears had bled from her eyes, knelt lovingly stroking his hair back. He wore dark gray dress pants, lustrous, black, designer shoes, and a white dress shirt, with his right sleeve rolled up to his shoulder. A metallic, armband-like device was clamped onto his arm, just above his elbow " and it projected a small, holographic screen, exhibiting his vitals, and a steady lifeline, as it fed a clear liquid solution into his body from a small, glass vial.<p>

"I can't stand this..." Angela confessed to the female physician beside her, in a shaky voice, as she looked down at her unconscious husband, still tenderly running her fingers through his hair. "Our little boy's lost on this ship somewhere..." She continued, fighting back the tears, as she looked back up at Dr. Chakwas, before turning to glance about the vast room. "I don't know if he's safe... Or if he's alone, and scared... I just feel so helpless...!" She whimpered, clenching her eyes shut, and forcing two tiny droplets to roll out.

"Don't..." Dr. Chakwas encouraged, as she sat in repose, adjacent to Angela, with her arms wrapped around her elevated knees, while she kept a close eye on Alex's vital sign monitor. "Matty's safe, wherever he is... I'm sure of it. And you'll find him..."

Angela turned to Dr. Chakwas, and ever so briefly cracked a smile, before it was drowned out by her despondence and desperation once more. "I hope you're right..." She uttered pleadingly. "After Matty got separated... And when Alex collapsed... I... I thought..." She paused for a moment, her eyes red, and watery, as she tried to swallow back the ball in her throat. "Thinking that I'd lost both of them... I just don't know what I'd do if I lost either one of my beautiful boys..." She claimed, smiling dolefully, as she looked down at Alex's face, and softly caressed it.

"I understand..." Dr. Chakwas sympathetically acknowledged, showing a tender smile. "But you won't. Trust me... We're all gonna come out of this just fine..."

"H...How is it that you seem so... unrattled by all this?"

A subtle grin came over Dr. Chakwas' expression, as she bowed her head and chuckled a little under her breath. "In my line of work, I've seen the worst there is..." She declared, cheerfully. "But if you wanna know the truth..." She continued, lowering her voice down to a low whisper, as she leaned in closer to Angela. "...I'm sure you've heard of Commander Shepard."

As the two women began conversing inconspicuously, the militia of security troops continued to pace and patrol around, while others continued to sparsely haul stray passengers in. A great majority of the patrons on-board had been corralled into the casino now. Those that were still being forcibly dragged in, at gunpoint, were but a thinly spread few, like the sporadic drip from a leaky faucet.

"So what do you think...?" A drell officer asked his human cohort, as they both stood by with large, empty black duffel bags hanging at their sides, with the strap across their chests. "Should we start collecting now?"

"Eh..." The human replied apathetically, with a lazy shrug of his shoulders. "Let's give it a few minutes... Tylan's not here yet, and he's supposed to be helping us with this... Besides, they're not going anywhere-" He assured arrogantly, nodding towards the crowd, with his head. "-and there's people still comin' in. I'd rather wait and clean 'em out, all at once..."

"Fine with me."

"...Hey, so uh... Let me ask you something." The human continued, with a sudden insidious gleam in his eyes, and a twisted smirk on his face. "Any of these bloated snobs you'd particularly like to off? I mean these rich bastards live off of people like us..."

"True." The drell casually affirmed, in response. "But it won't bother me after I have their credits to keep me company, heheheh..." He said, as they both broke out into a devilish cackle.

"Heh, so what are you gonna do with your share?" The human inquired, with the traces of laughter still in his voice.

"Not sure... Maybe I'll buy a small moon somewhere to build my mansion. How 'bout you?"

"Heh... I'll buy Omega!" The repugnant human declared, with a gluttonous grin. "And Aria T'Loak's fine blue ass along with it...!"

As they both stood together, cackling like jackals, and fantasizing of opulent futures, filled with wealth, excess, and indulgence, an angry ruckus began to spill out from one of the Promenade Deck's entryways.

"Get your damn hands off me, I'm moving!" A woman exclaimed irately, as an asari was suddenly seen escorting a sopping wet, rebellious young woman, enrobed in nothing but a brown towel, into the main floor, from the entry, with a brandished sidearm aimed rigidly at her.

She marched into the Promenade Deck, without an ounce of fear etched on her face – a vivacious, indomitable young woman. Her large eyes were a deep lavender hue, like the color of lilacs. Her hair was wrapped up in a brown towel, and the wet, clumped together tips dangled out from underneath. The soft, light skin of her bare shoulders and ankles glistened with moisture in the light, and the large, brown towel providing her coverage, was wrapped tightly around her enticingly curvacious figure, and snugly secured with a bundled knot over her chest.

"Hurry it up!" The asari demanded, as she jabbed her pistol's barrel between the belligerent woman's shoulder blades, and used it to shove her along.

"What's wrong ruffles?!" The dripping beauty demanded, turning her head to glare at the asari, as she continued along, nearing the hostage holding area. "One little human girl too much for you to handle without your gun?"

"Is there a problem here...?" A turian officer inquired, as he approached the two quarreling women, accompanied by a male salarian, and another asari.

"Oh, well if it isn't Sergeant Dingus, and the Rent-A-Cop Brigade!"

"Nothing I can't handle, sir..." The asari assured, as the two continued on, nearing the seated cluster of hostages. "Though I'd recommend keeping an eye on this one... She's a biotic, and she can be quite a handful..."

"Puhh... I'm no biotic..." The towel enrobed woman scoffed.

"Yeah sure, bitch. And what was that little light show you put on upstairs, huh?"

The comment caused the dripping maiden to stop, and turn herself around, bringing her face to face with the barrel of the asari's gun, and showing no qualm whatsoever, in its presence.

"I don't need biotics to deal with such a 'crack team of security guards', like yourselves..." She admonished, with a statement brimming with sarcasm and disgust.

"Alright, alright...!" The turian interjected, sounding mildly annoyed, as he stepped up to the enrobed woman, with his sidearm now drawn as well. "Just shut up, and sit down. Move...!"

The young lady glared a hole straight through the turian, before her better judgment took over, and she decided to obey. She turned back around, facing the front of the crowded agglomeration, and began walking forward to find a seat. It was at that moment, that the turian thought it easy to take a sneak peak. He lowered his gun, tilted his head to its side, slouched down a little, and with the barrel of his weapon, tried to lift the back of her towel.

The instant she felt it " too quickly for anything to be revealed, the dripping beauty gasped in shock, as she threw her hands behind her, swiftly forcing the towel down, as she spun herself around with a jerk. A sneer of pure, unbridged contempt grew on her face, as she shriveled her nose, clenched her teeth, tightened her brow, and cocked her right arm back, with a clenched fist at the end of it, when suddenly, WHAM!

Without the slightest bit of thought, or hesitation, the damp young lady plowed her balled up fist straight into the turian's smug face, striking his left eye, and leveling him where he stood, with a thud, as he slammed back first against the carpeted floor.

"AHH! You fucking human bitch!" The turian snarled through his teeth, with a mixture of pain, and hatred, as he clutched the left side of his face with his hands.

At that moment, the three guards still standing each brandished their weapons, and clicked the safety mechanisms off, as they fanned out in a semi-circle around the lone human woman. Realizing what she had done would cost her dearly, she took in a deep breath, stood up straight and proud, and peered deep into the eyes of each of her assassins, as if saying "May these eyes haunt you long after I'm gone..."

"That's enough!" An angered, bellowing voice challenged, just as the three began to tighten the grips around their triggers. "Leave her alone!" He ordered, as the three turned towards the source to see a stalwart Jacob now standing with a threatening look in his eyes.

Though still keeping their weapons primed to fire, both the asari guards, and the salarian, each lowered their handguns a bit, and loosened the hold around their triggers. They looked down towards the

turian sitting himself up on the floor, with half his face masked behind his hand, seemingly searching for his approval. From this, one could easily infer that the bruised officer could only be a superior of theirs.

Without actually saying anything, the turian just shared a glance with the ardent young woman. Her mauve eyes spoke of detest, contempt, and disgust, while his were still mired in disbelief. Eventually the turian just sighed, and tilted his head with a jerk, towards the gathered crowd, motioning for her to move on, and find a seat.

Seeing this, the other guards retracted their weapons, allowing the drenched young maiden to release the breath she had been holding, in a sigh of relief. She clenched her lips, about faced, and strolled over to the man who probably saved her life, with her arms crossed securely in front of her, holding the towel tightly.

"Thank you..." She gratefully acknowledged Jacob, as she stepped up to him, with a look of both admiration, and curiosity reflected in her big, amethyst colored eyes.

"My pleasure, Miss..." Jacob responded in a somewhat reserved tone, however exhibiting a genuine look of concern on his countenance. "Are you alright...? They didn't hurt you, did they?"

The young lady sighed. "...Only my pride." She said, as she tilted her head, took the ends of her black hair hanging out from beneath the towel, and began using it to dab it dry. "I had JUST stepped out of the shower when these damn neanderthals burst in, and dragged me out like a caught flounder..."

"Oh...! Uhm..." Jacob continued, stuttering a bit, as he suddenly looked down, and searched the area where he had been sitting, quickly spotting what he was looking for. "Please... Take my coat..." He genially offered, as he awkwardly tried to bend down, with his hands still securely fastened behind his back. He then shifted himself around, and tried to lean, and crouch... Anything he could do to pick it up for her, while a look of modest embarrassment began growing on his face. "...Eheh."

"Tha-Thank you...!" The enrobed young woman said graciously, with traces of a giggle under her breath, as she put a halting hand up to Jacob. "I-It's alright... I can get it." She happily assured, as she slowly squatted down, being careful to keep the towel tightly wrapped around the whole of her body, and picked the fashionable tan jacket up, off the floor.

"Heh... Sorry about that..." Jacob tittered a bit, exhibiting a somewhat uncharacteristically bashful smile, as he watched her swing the coat around her soft shoulders, and slide her arms into the satin-lined sleeves. "Uh, mm-my name's... Jacob Taylor, by the way..."

"Ah... Well, Mr. Taylor, it's very nice to meet you..." She reciprocated, with an endearing smile, as she snugly bundled the coat around herself. "I'm Vanessa Masters... And I can already tell that this cruise hasn't been a total disaster..."

13. Chapter 13: A Wrench in the Works

****Salvation: Episode I â€" The Taking of the Carmenta
Illustria****

Disclaimer: This fan-fiction is part of an episodic series taking place after Salvation: A Half-Life/Mass Effect Universe Fan Fiction, which will lead directly to its sequel, Salvation II: Project Prometheus. These episodes and sequel take place OUTSIDE of the Mass Effect 3 continuity. Characters property of their respective companies, Half-Life created by Valve and Mass Effect created by Bioware.

****Chapter 13: A Wrench in the Works****

DING! Came the chime of two fine crystal glasses, as they were tapped together on the bridge.

"To fortune and glory...!" Davix toasted, as he raised his glass to Teshya, who was seated at the inert console beside him, before tilting his neck, and knocking back the drink in one, swift gulp.

He sat reclined in his seat, with his feet kicked and crossed on the desktop edge of the inactive console he sat it. Similarly, Teshya sat at the blank terminal directly to his left, swilling the sparkling drink around in her glass, as she sampled some fine, exotic fruit.

A food cart now rested near the center of the bridge, topped with silvery platters of fine, exquisite delicacies, vintage wines, and expensive champagne. Though so far, the only ones that seemed to be indulging in the extravagant smorgasbord were the two mercenaries fortified in dark red and white Blood-Pack armor.

The Carmenta Illustria's original bridge crew had been moved out, and taking their place was a troubled quarian, running a majority of the ship's systems from the largest console at the fore of the bridge, with a volus purporting to be a Captain, dictating direction, beside him.

Two salarian officers had taken a post on the bridge, guarding the main entryway. They stood on either side of it, like sentries, with their arms stoically placed behind their backs.

In a corner of the room, the burly, light-green skinned krogan, with a deep, lime-green, osteoderm brow plate, yet stood ruminating in silence, as his attention remained completely enthralled by the surveillance video on the screen in front of him. There were multiple feeds on the screen, but the most prominent, and the one that had spellbindingly engrossed him, was the feed of the hostage holding area, in the Promenade Deck. His reptilian eyes were narrowed by the light, yet as sharp as a predator on the prowl. He watched a young, fellow krogan sitting restlessly. A salarian and a geth seemingly making small talk. A young, naive, uniformed turian chatting away with a scarred older one. And a dark skinned gentleman conversing with a light skinned brunet beauty, wearing only a tan suit jacket, and a brown towel. Even with these dangerous figures firmly at their mercy, Kargas couldn't elude the feeling that something was amiss...

"Spirits, I didn't know they made food this good...!" Davix exclaimed

with a revelrous delight, as he dangled a sliced strip of meat high above his tilted back head, and slowly lowered it into his gaping mouth. "Mmm...!" He muttered euphorically, as he chewed.

"Best food in the galaxy...!" The milky eyed Security Commander assured, as he walked up behind Davix, with a lit cigarette between his lips. "Dextro, or otherwise..." He assured, giving Davix a firm pat on the back, as he pulled his cigarette out, and exhaled a white stream of smoke into the air.

"Get used to it, my friend-" He said, with a smug, self-satisfied look - pinching the cigarette between his thumb and index fingers, as he watched the smoke disperse into nothingness above his head. "-'cause this is only the beginning...!"

"Well... I was hopin' I'd get to see a little action on this barge... But here's to Illustria Security...!" Davix toasted once more, raising his glass up high. "And to all the filthy rich saps who thought you'd be protecting them...!"

"I'll drink to that..." Teshya announced with a smirk, as she raised a champagne glass, with a small, blue fruit sitting at the bottom of the bubbly cocktail.

As the asari sipped triumphantly on her drink, the Commander casually strolled over to her, and leaned over the console she sat at, with the smoking cigarette compressed within his brash, crooked smile.

"So uh... Tesh..." He began in a sly, cocksure tone of voice, as his covetous eyes meticulously inspected the asari's figure, who in turn was already engaged in rolling her own eyes. "Whaddaya say when this is all over... We keep this ship as our own, personal love nest, and you can show me what that famous, asari promiscuity is all about...?"

"Ugh..." Teshya groaned in disgust, as she simply reclined back in her seat and turned her face away, trying to put as much distance as possible between the two of them. "...Just get away from me, human."

Kim stood upright from his leaning position against the console, as he tried to hide the look of discouragement bleeding through his expression, with a small smirk, and a chuckle under his breath.

"Don't take it personal, Commander...!" Davix chimed in, reclining far back in his seat, with his hands locked behind his head, under his fringe. "Tesh hates all humans. Not just you...!"

"Eh, she's just playin' hard to get 'cause she knows it drives me crazy." Kim coyly acknowledged, as he crushed out his cigarette on the console.

Just then, as Kim turned and took a few steps towards the cart topped with fine cuisine, the door to the bridge unexpectedly slid open, and there at the entryway, was a turian donned in the same uniform as every other corrupt security officer on the ship. Hesitantly, he walked in, past the two salarian sentries stationed near the door, who only greeted him by looking at him with furrowed brows, and

perplexed expressions â€" obviously recognizing either him or his uniform as benign.

"Tylan..." Commander Kim addressed, with a bit of surprise both in his voice, and on his countenance, when he noticed the turian. "What are you doing up here? This ain't your detail." He said, as he pulled the sterling silver lid off of one of the dishes, causing an eruption of steam to pour out, and float towards the ceiling, like a miniature, vaporous, mushroom cloud. Kim lowered his head towards the dish, and inhaled deeply the rich, delectable aroma, before sighing in delight. "Ahhh..."

"Shouldn't you be down on the Promenade collecting by now...?" He continued, holding onto the silvery dish lid, which dripped with condensation, as he looked back at the clearly agitated turian.

"Uhm... Well, yes sir... But-" Tylan stuttered to begin, as the mandibles around his mouth twitched back and forth, perhaps as a sign of turian anxiety. "-there's... Well, there's a matter I felt needed your... attention..."

"Uh-huh... Which is...?"

"Perhaps... I could... talk to you in private...?" He beckoned, apprehensively sputtering his words out, almost one at a time, as he bowed his head in shame.

Clang! Came the loud, reverberant sound of silver against silver, as Kim slammed the dish lid back onto the tray, at a loss for patience, causing the turian to jump a bit, in a fright. "Out with it, officer!"

"Uhh..." He began, in a shaky voice, beneath the sound of a forming dry heave, as he searched for the right words, before rapidly commencing. "Well I... I waited to see if they would bring him in! But I haven't spotted him at all! I've been looking over every passenger they bring, and all the decks have been pretty much cleared out, but he still hasn't showed up, and-and-I figured th..."

"Whoa-whoa-whoa...!" Kim shouted, putting his hands up, and waving them at the turian blathering on, a mile a minute. "Slow the fuck down...! Who? What the hell are you talking about...?!"

"Sh...Shepard, sir... Commander Shepard..."

"SHEPARD?!" Came the bellowing exclamation from the towering krogan in the corner, as he suddenly raised his head at the drop of the name. The outburst quickly caught the attention of both Leahr'Haan, and Tarrik, who were seated at the front-most console on the bridge, and the two mercenaries seated nearby. Kargas spun himself around with a jerk, and swiftly marched in a huff, straight up to the nervous turian, with a look of rage brewing in his eyes.

"Did you say Commander Shepard?!" The seething krogan demanded, sputtering droplets of saliva onto the turian's face, as he spoke. "As in the Alliance N7 Marine, Commander Shepard?!"

The turian reeled his head back in intimidation, and sunk it down between his shoulders, as he replied. "Y... Yeah...?"

"RAAAAAHHHH!" The acknowledgment sent the mighty krogan into an uncontrolled rage! Suddenly, he cocked his arm back, turned, and with unforgiving force, slammed his tightly coiled, wrecking-ball of a fist into the adjacent, metallic wall â€" leaving a small, fist-shaped dent where it had struck.

"HE'S HERE!" Kargas bellowed furiously, through clenched teeth, practically foaming at the mouth. "I WANT HIM!"

"Hey! Hey! Whoa...!" Kim shouted out, pleadingly, as he stepped between Kargas, and the now cowering turian officer, in an attempt to quell and restrain him.

"I WANT SHEPARD!" The krogan continued to rant, in a vicious fury. "HE'S MINE!"

"Hold on!" Kim beseeched, raising his hands up towards Kargas in a halting manner, and trying to maintain control of the situation, to which he was mildly successful, as the krogan seemed to cool down a bit. "We don't even know he's on-board yet. We don't know what he's talking about, just calm down...! Take it easy!"

"What is the meaning of this...?!" A voice, accompanied by the loud hiss of a respirator, demanded, as Tarrik stepped up to the group convened near the rear of the bridge, still wearing the pristine, white Captain's Cap upon his brow.

"Nothing!" Kim shot back, with a blend of frustration and anger building up, as he slowly turned back around to face the turian messenger. "Look, everybody just calm down!"

"And you!" He asserted, pointing a rigid finger into Tylan's face. "Explain yourself. Why are you saying Commander Shepard is on-board this ship...?"

"B-Because he is, sir... I saw him..." The daunted turian elaborated, with a look of dread reflected in his eyes. "I-I was... the one that was on duty in the main dining hall, last night... He was... Captain Ryback's guest of honor..."

"...Jesus Christ...!" Kim muttered in a hushed, exasperated tone of voice, which was quickly muffled, as he tilted his head back, and placed both hands over his face.

"I knew it...!" Kargas snarled through his teeth, as he began to pace around in a small circle, while repeatedly pounding a fist into his open palm. "From the moment I boarded... I felt it in my blood...!"

"Shepard...!" Kim screeched to himself, in a gruff, throaty voice, through tightly clenched teeth, as he dragged his hands up towards his temples, and yanked down at his hair with his fingers. "Of all the god damn things that could've gone wrong... we get Commander 'save the Citadel-stop the Reapers-you gotta be fucking kidding me' Shepard...!"

While the Security Commander worried, nearly ripping out his own

hair, and while the Blood-Pack leader brooded over sweet thoughts of mutilation and disembowelment, the arrogant, manipulative, conniving little volus was already ruminating on his own schemes.

"If Commander Shepard's on this ship, he'd be worth a fortune to me, alive...!" Tarrik thought to himself, as he tapped a stubby, curled finger against his suit's mouthpiece. "He's got no shortage of enemies, and any number of them would be willing to pay exorbitant sums to get their hands on him...! I just have to make sure these clods handle the situation appropriately..."

"Tylan...!" The Commander started again, sounding painfully frustrated. "If you knew all this, why the HELL didn't you bring it up sooner?!" The Commander demanded, growing increasingly aggravated, as he pulled his hands away from his face, and shook them demandingly at the turian.

"W...ell." The turian hesitantly began again, as he lightly rubbed his forehead with the edge of his hand. "I was hoping he'd show up on the Promenade Deck with the other hostages... A-and you told us not to bother you with anything until AFTER we took the ship...!" He informed, as he looked back up at Kim "his fearful eyes searching for empathy. "You said just stick to the plan, do our jobs, and act as if nothing was wrong..."

The fog-eyed Commander placed his hands akimbo, on his hips. He bowed his head, and shook it in disappointment, as he slowly exhaled, a long, drawn-out sigh. Suddenly, and without warning, he looked up, lunged forward, grabbed the turian guard by the collar, and swung him, with authority, towards the adjacent wall, pinning his back against it, with a loud thud.

"You idiot!" He exclaimed indignantly, as he hoisted the turian up, against the wall, lifting him up to the very tips of his toes. "Didn't you think... For one moment... That this might be a tiny, little, FUCKING exception! You moron-prick-piece of shit!"

"S-sir, I was just following your orders!"

"ORDERS?!" Kim barked, in a rage. "You need orders to use common sense, you god damn turian twit?!"

"...C-Co-Commander, please!"

"Wait a minute, Kim..." Kargas suddenly chimed in, as he stopped his pacing, and opened his eyes wide "coming to a great realization. "Of course... Of course!" He exclaimed, as he unexpectedly turned, and rushed back over towards the surveillance console, in the far corner of the room.

"Of course, what?!" Kim demanded, as he was left holding onto the poor turian's collar, in dismal befuddlement.

Kim turned back to glare into the eyes of the turian before him, completely at his mercy. Tylan, seeing no other options, reciprocated a nervous grin, hoping that it would buy him some amnesty. Almost as if it had worked, the Commander released his tight hold on the turian's collar, with a hard shove against the wall. Leaving the daunted Tylan behind, the Commander turned, and marched over towards Kargas, who had repositioned himself in front of the screen.

"I knew it..." Kargas muttered to himself, as Kim approached him, with Tarrik, and both the mercenaries in tow, behind him. "That's why they're familiar me to me..."

"What are you going on about, Karg...?" The Commander inquired, as he stepped up beside the krogan, with his arms crossed.

"It's his team, don't you get it?!" Kargas snapped back, as his eyes narrowed, with the screen the focal point of his gaze. "Look... The geth." He said, as he pointed towards the passively seated Legion. "Shepard has been known to travel with a geth... And the turian...!" He continued, shifting his finger's aim with each new target he addressed. "That has to be the one they called Archangel... The one responsible for the deaths of many of my Blood-Pack brood brothers on Omega..."

"The krogan whelp must be Okeer's progeny..." He uttered in disgust, as he turned his focus towards Grunt. "His own tank-bred abomination unto his own people... And... And the salarian... Yes..." As he explained further, a sudden twisted, monstrous gleam came over his eyes, and the corners of his large mouth began to curl upwards, to form an odious, evil, and somewhat lustful looking smile. "Yes...! That is the salarian! They're all here... And they're mine...!"

"What are you talking about...?!" Commander Kim demanded, greatly perplexed, as he watched the krogan savor the deranged fruits of his nightmarish daydreams. "And what's this beef you've got with Shepard?"

As Kargas turned towards Kim to respond, Tarrik's shrill, confident voice quickly interjected, moments before he could speak.

"Gentlemen, I don't foresee any majorly complicated problem here..." He offered up, in a very calm, calculated demeanor. "All we have to do is make Shepard come to us... We simply retrieve one of the hostages, and broadcast a message across the ship threatening to kill them, should Shepard refuse to surrender himself... If he does resist, we'll simply continue to execute one hostage every five minutes, until he gives in... But I sincerely doubt it'll come to that... I'm more than certain that one will suffice..."

"Don't be an idiot, Tarrik." Kim countermanded, scoffing at the suggestion. "Shepard ain't gonna fall for that shit..."

"And why not...?! It worked on his team, didn't it?"

"Tarrik... Shepard sacrificed dozens of Alliance ships at the battle of the Citadel..." The one-eyed Commander rebutted, as he turned to look down, with his hands on his hips, giving the volus his full attention. "Hundreds of his own people, just to save the Destiny Ascension... You think he'd sweat a few random hostages...?"

"I agree..." Kargas concurred. "Shepard is a warrior. He would never yield to such petty, cowardice tactics..."

"Hmm..." Tarrik muttered under the hiss of his respirator, as he bowed his head, conceding defeat. "I suppose you have a

point..."

"Yeah... Alright, now let's all think about this for just a moment..." Kim suggested in a placid, composed tone, as he took a stoic demeanor. Meanwhile, Kargas had already pulled the sizable shotgun off his back, and was busy loading a thermal clip into the empty chamber.

"Now, when we first took the ship, these guys fought back..." He began to explain, as he pointed over his shoulder, towards the screen, addressing the semi-circle of accomplices that had formed around it. "But they had absolutely no idea what was going on... It's safe to assume that this isn't some sort of black op, or sting operation... No, these guys just finished fighting a war... I'd say they were vacationing. And that means no armor.. No weapons... Now, we've got his team. Or at least most of it, there could be more... But as long as we keep our heads, this isn't anything we can't handle. The quarian's activated his mechs, and I'll put my men on full alert... We'll comb every inch of this ship until we find 'em...!"

"I'll be the one that finds him...!" Kargas asserted, as a bright red indicator light suddenly lit up on the side of his shotgun, indicating the selection of incendiary ammunition. "And tonight... I'll drink his blood in a toast to his own bones...!"

Tarrik took a slight step back upon hearing the krogan's disturbing intentions. But it wasn't the graphic notion that had him reeling. No, rather it was the sudden, gripping concern over potentially losing a substantial monetary mother lode.

"Look, Shepard could be anywhere..." Kim replied, shrugging at Kargas indifferently. "Finding him could be like finding a needle in a haystack. But if you wanna run all over this giant ship searching for him, be my guest..."

"Oh, I'll find him...!" Kargas asserted, as his fingers anxiously tapped the sides of the shotgun they clutched, as if they were keying a piano. "And I don't know what you're trying to say, but I have no intentions of sifting through dry grass for pins or needles of any kind...!"

"...It's just an expression, Karg." Kim replied, flusteredly rolling his eyes, and rubbing his forehead, as Kargas turned to march out of the room " quickly forcing the group that stood around him to part, and clear a path.

"Kargas, my good krogan, you deserve better than that, don't you...?" A voice suddenly spoke up, slightly obscured by a heavy respirator breath, as Kargas stomped towards the door, causing him to momentarily cease his advance.

"...What now, Tarrik?" The krogan pointedly demanded, with very little patience in reserve.

"Well... I just assumed-" Tarrik began in a nonchalant tone, casually strolling over towards the reptilian behemoth "-as a krogan, you'd want more than to simply rush out, and kill him..."

"You can't even begin to imagine the vendetta I have with this

human..." Kargas rebutted with a growl, and a snort through his large nostrils, as he clutched the stock of his shotgun tighter. "Why wouldn't I want that?!"

"Because you're a krogan!" Tarrik affirmed, proudly raising a clenched fist into the air. "You deserve the glory of having him brought to you... Alive...!"

Kargas eased the grip on his shotgun, as he slowly turned around, with his attention suddenly enthralled. He spoke not a word, but his face clearly conveyed the phrase: "I'm listening..."

"Imagine it, Kargas...! Having him brought to you in chains... What greater triumph could there be, than having your enemy dragged to you, and thrown before you on his hands and knees, as he snivels for mercy...?! But there'll be no mercy... will there...?"

"Yes..." The krogan replied in a low, hushed tone, as he turned his eyes towards the ceiling, and ruminated in devious delight. "I like it... Something I can savor..."

"Why don't you let us do it, boss...?" An eager, female voice suddenly interjected, much to the volus' delight, as Teshya stepped forward, pulling her sub-machine gun off her hip. "Let us bring him back for you...!"

"Oh-ho-ho-ho-yeah...!" Her turian partner chimed in, laughing and grinning with an aggressive avidity, as he stepped up beside her, and pulled the large assault rifle off the back of his armor. "I'd love to get me a shot at Shepard, sir!"

"Ah, yes..." The krogan eagerly agreed, as he stepped forth, and placed one hand on each of their shoulders. "Teshya... Davix... You two will be my krantt! You will fight in my name, and you will bring Shepard back to me a broken man... But alive...! So that the last thing he sees will be the sight of his still beating heart crushed within my grip...!"

"Consider it done, sir...!" The turian acknowledged with a stoic salute, before once again gripping his silver rifle with both hands, as he and his asari partner stepped around the krogan, and walked out of the room with a purpose.

"Your conquest will be glorious, my friend..." Tarrik assured, exhibiting a great sense of pride in his voice, as he watched the two Blood-Pack armored mercenaries march out of the room, past the two salarian sentries.

Commander Kim shrugged, and shook his head as he looked on, somewhat perplexed by the strange krogan obsession for glory, and dominance. Without giving it a thought further, he panned his gaze a bit, quickly spotting the turian bearer of bad news out of the corner of his eyes.

"...And you Tylan!" He barked furiously, as he fully turned to face him, and pointed a stiff finger in his face. "You get your boney ass out there! I want you on roving patrol... Now!"

"Uh, y-yes sir... Understood, but..."

"Don't question me boy, just get your ass back out there, and do it!"

"Yes sir, but there's something else..." Tylan reluctantly blurted out, with both eyes clenched tightly, as if bracing himself for a firing squad.

"...Something else?" Kim reiterated, sounding completely calm, and yet somehow brewing in a sort of silent rage, as he grinned odiously, and nodded his head. "Do you WANT me to kill you...?"

"N-n... No sir..." The turian said, in a shaky voice, that made him sound as if he were about to vomit, while he tried to swallow back at the bile that had formed in his throat.

"More problems, Commander Kim...?" Tarrik queried, in a snide voice, as he approached the two uniformed security officers, after witnessing another debacle in the works.

"...Evidently." The Commander uttered, groaning and sighing all at once, as he tilted his head back as far as it would go, and allowed his shoulders to droop listlessly, before bringing his bitter, intimidating gaze back down to the turian before him. "Spit it out, boy...!"

"Well, there was... someone else..." Tylan hesitantly began, as his mandibles twitched a bit. "Another human..."

"Part of Shepard's team?"

"I think so..." He continued. "But there was something strange about him... Something different... The Captain had called me over to his table, and asked me to eject a human girl who was ranting, and raving about this guy... As I dragged her out, she kept going on and on about how he was supposedly some legendary figure from their history-Err... Your history..." He corrected himself, with a stutter and an awkward pause, before proceeding. "Anyway, she just kept babbling on about how this could be her big break, and how she had to get an interv-"

"Whatever, what's your point?!" Kim snapped, indignantly, quickly running out of patience.

"Well, sir... My point is that I think he's loose on the ship too..." Tylan squeamishly elaborated. "He hasn't shown up with the rest of the passengers, either..."

"How can you be sure...?" The Commander asked, having calmed down a bit, and instead taking on a more wary demeanor. "You'd recognize him?"

"Oh, yes sir..." The turian assured, without a doubt. "I'd recognize this human anywhere. Especially since he was wearing a targeting visor for some reason..."

"Targeting visor...?"

"Yeah..." The turian confirmed with a shrug. "It was weird... The girl kept saying his name..." He elaborated, as he placed his hand over his chin, and paused for a moment of contemplation, before

continuing on. "Started with a J, I think... It was... Jorram...? Jorgan...?"

"...Jordan?" Kim supplemented, following along perhaps out of nothing more than sheer curiosity.

"Yeah, Jordan! I think that's it...!" Tylan declared enthusiastically. "Jordan... Jordan Freenan!"

"Jordan Freenan...?" Commander Kim reiterated, dismally confused, with a perplexed eyebrow raised. He took a brief look down at Tarrik, standing beside him, who only reciprocated a confused shrug of his shoulders, before looking back up at the informing turian officer. "Who the f...You sure you don't mean, uh... Gordon Freeman...?"

"Yeah...! Yeah-yeah, that's it! Sorry, I have trouble with human names. But yeah, that's it! Gordon Freeman. He's the other one that's loose!"

"Eheh..." The Commander gave a soft, low titter, as he closed his eyes, bowed his his head, and shook it, with a large, ironic smile on his face. "Eheh-heh-heh...!" He continued to laugh â€" his titter evolving into a slow, almost maniacal cackle.

"Who is he?" Tarrik queried, interrupting Kim's cynical laughter.

"Who, Gordon Freeman...?" He replied, with traces of his cackle still under his breath. "Gordon Freeman is, as you heard Officer Tylan put it, a human legend... Back when the Combine invaded Earth some TWO-HUNDRED YEARS AGO..." He explained, quickly elevating his voice at the ridiculous notion, as he glared at the turian. "Gordon Freeman was said to be the guy that supposedly kicked their slimy, maggot asses off of Earth..."

"But he's dead." He declared adamantly. "You know us humans, boy... We don't get to live a thousand years... Hell, we're lucky to see a hundred and fifty."

"Well, the girl said something about Commander Shepard saying, that he had been in stasis or... or something, and was never really ki..." Tylan abruptly stopped, as Commander Kim raised a stern finger, and placed it up inches in front of the turian's face, quickly prompting him to be silent.

With his subordinate officer clammed up, the Commanding officer raised his right arm, and materialized his omni-tool. He quickly manifested a holographic screen over it, and began punching in a rapid set of keys.

"Bah...!" He griped to himself, annoyed, as he continued his work. "Damn encrypted line..."

As he struggled with his forearm mounted, holographic computer, he was suddenly successful, as he uttered "Ah, here we go..."

"Alright..." Kim began again, returning his attention to Tylan, as he held his arm out for him to see.

The screen was filled with tiled photographs of a human man, with black rimmed eyeglasses, and a goatee. There were various shots of him, but each of them appeared to be from a high angle, looking downward. And in none of the images did he appear too happy to have his picture taken. In one photo, he was wearing some sort of blue denim jumpsuit, and trying to shield his face from the flash, as he appeared to be stepping out of an old-fashioned, antiquated train. In another photo, he actually seemed to be charging the camera " this time wearing some sort of orange armor, and swinging a long, red and silver piece of steel.

"So you're telling me-" The Commander continued, speaking at a slow, dubious pace. "-that this is the guy you saw...? The guy who's now loose on the ship, along with Shepard...?"

Tylan squinted a bit, as he moved his face closer towards the screen floating over the Commander's arm. Suddenly, his eyes opened wide, as he quickly reeled his head back and nodded. "Yeah, that's him!" The turian acknowledged, bolstered with confidence. "That's the guy...! Except, instead of those things he has on his face, he was wearing a combat visor, but that's definitely him...!"

The fog-eyed Commander sighed in disappointment, as he tapped his wrist, and dematerialized his omni-tool. He looked up at Tylan, jutting his chin forward, with a look of indifference on his face. "...Get the fuck out."

"Y... Yes sir..." The turian stuttered a bit, in acknowledgment, before finding it best to simply concede, and comply. He saluted his superior, which actually wasn't customary, but he felt compelled to do so, perhaps hoping that the gesture would grant him favor in the future. And then, with a nervous twitch of his mandible, he turned, and proceeded towards the exit.

"...idiot." Kim muttered in a contempt filled whisper, as he watched him walk out the door.

"What if he's telling the truth...?" Tarrik queried, sounding a bit concerned.

"Oh-ho, I'm sure he thinks he is...!" Kim scoffed in reply, as he strolled over towards the nearest console on the bridge, swiveled the chair around, and had a seat. "But he's a moron...! And if I didn't desperately need every last man right now, I would've shot him where he stood..."

"Well, is it possible...?" The inquisitive volus continued to ask, as he stood before the seated Kim " the two of them now nearly at eye-level. "Could this... Freeman still be alive...?"

Kim sighed. "Alright look..." He responded, aggravated. "I never bought into the whole 'One Free Man' bullshit they fed us in school... I don't think he could've done everything they say he did... But supposedly he was a bad mother fucker... A real walkin' one man army... You know, the same kinda shit they say about Shepard... But even so, the guy IS dead! He was killed in some battle with the Combine..."

"They said Commander Shepard was dead, too..."

"That was different, Tarrik." Kim refuted, stringently. "Like I said, this was about two-hundred years ago... Whoever that idiot thinks he saw - Gordon Freeman is not alive... And he sure as hell isn't on-board this ship...!"

"And if he is...?"

"He's not!" The Commander refuted angrily.

"And if he is...?!" Tarrik demanded again, showing no signs of letting up. "Humor me...!"

"Ugh..." Kim groaned, as he leaned back in his chair, and slumped down. "If he is... Then like Shepard, he's just one man... unarmed, and unarmored... Nothing we can't handle... But if we've got two men... One of them being John Shepard... And the other Gordon Freeman... Then we'd have a serious problem..."

14. Chapter 14: A Gallery of Fools

***Salvation: Episode I â€" The Taking of the Carmenta
Illustria***

Disclaimer: This fan-fiction is part of an episodic series taking place after Salvation: A Half-Life/Mass Effect Universe Fan Fiction, which will lead directly to its sequel, Salvation II: Project Prometheus. These episodes and sequel take place OUTSIDE of the Mass Effect 3 continuity. Characters property of their respective companies, Half-Life created by Valve and Mass Effect created by Bioware.

(** (Author's Note: Heh hehe... Well, here's the REAL Chapter 14. Please pardon that gag, Reaper-Hamster chapter I submitted on April 1st... I thought it'd be a funny idea... Though I don't think poor Shepard would ever be able to cope with the thought of his poor little hamster becoming an agent of the Reapers. Anyway, this update release Chapters 14 and 15. Chapters 16 and 17 will actually be released within the next couple of days too - they're pretty much finished, but there are a few things here and there that I still need to tweak before releasing. But here's hoping you'll enjoy these REAL chapters hehe.)**

Chapter 14: A Gallery of Fools

"Okay..." Lehr'Haan dubiously began, swallowing at something knotted in his throat, as he watched a few blips on his laptop's holographic screen. "The mechs are starting to disperse throughout the various decks of the ship. Standard patrol protocols..." He paused for a remorseful sigh. "Live ammunition... All online, and fully functional. Except for the YMIR, of course."

"Wait, you have a YMIR mech?!" Commander Kim pressingly queried, as he and Tarrik stood behind the seated quarian, near the bridge forward windows, looking on.

"Yeah, it's... back on the cargo ship." Lehr explained, swiveling around in his seat.

"What? Why's it back there?!" Kim demanded to know. "Activate it. A YMIR could be just what we need if Shepard's on-board."

"I can't..." The quarian contritely admitted. "Especially not from up here, it's not even on my network..."

"Yes..." Tarrik brashly interjected, with a hissing breath, and a heavy tinge of dissatisfaction in his voice. "Unfortunately, despite my misplaced faith, and overwhelming support, Leahr was unable to render the motorized brute completely operational..."

"So it's just sitting down there...?!" The one-eyed Commander frustratedly entreated, as Leahr slouched down in his seat, and shook his already bowed head. "A two-ton paper weight..."

"It works!" Leahr suddenly rebutted, in an outburst, sounding both angry and despondent. "All it's systems are online, except navigation and guidance... Without those, it won't be able to find it's way around the ship. It'd just walk into walls everywhere. And it would take hours to upload the necessary programming, so I just left it on sentry mode. I WOULD'VE had it all done..." He continued to elaborate, as he turned to glare at the stout volus. "Except I got the call from Tarrik a month early."

"Argh, forget it...!" Kim griped, and rolled his eyes, as he grabbed a datapad hanging off the console, at which Leahr'Haan was seated. "Just plot us a course to the nearest mass relay, and get us there..." He ordered, as he turned his attention to the datapad, and began to walk away from the front of the bridge. "The sooner we're out of Citadel Space, the better..."

"Commander Kim!" Tarrik called out, as he turned to follow the fog-eyed head of security. Meanwhile, Leahr swiveled his chair back around, towards the bridge's primary control terminal, and remorsefully began to carry out his mandate.

"The mechs have been deployed, but I still strongly suggest you put your team on full alert, at once."

"Yeah, yeah, just hold your horses...!" Kim scorned, wrinkling his brow with a look of annoyance on his face, as he began working the datapad.

"...My what?"

"I wanna verify something before I panic my entire crew over what could be nothing." He stated, as he summoned some sort of list on the datapad. "I don't exactly trust Tylan's word..." He admitted, as he briefly looked down at Tarrik. "The guy could be on Red Sand or something, for all I know... For god's sake the idiot thought he was seeing Gordon Freeman, after all..."

"And you're still so sure he wasn't...?" Tarrik skeptically imposed, as he tilted his head, and placed both hands on his rounded hips.

"Positive."

* * *

><p>"D'you find anyone?!" A shouting voice spilled into the duct from the outside, echoing with a metallic oscillation, within the long, aluminum shaft.<p>

Still at the fore of the small band of stragglers, Dr. Freeman crept forward, inching along at a laggard pace so as to avoid making any noise that could incite detection. Behind him, the lavishly dressed Miranda Lawson, and the fidgety nerved Cameron McClane still followed along closely, at the pace he had set " but with the voices echoing from the room just below them, they were careful as mice not to make a sound.

It seemed much colder now. Perhaps a result of the continued exposure to the frigid air breezing through the vent shaft. Their hands and faces were like ice, and numbing. And the cold, metal surface of the vent wall stung Miranda's bare shoulders, like needles, each time she couldn't avoid contact with it.

But despite the increasingly bitter cold, which would no doubt prove to be the most benign of all the obstacles they'd face this day, they pressed on. Up ahead, where the shaft split into a T, the ceiling of the narrow, cramped duct was painted in horizontal stripes of yellowish light, shinning up from a small grate. A grate which was also the source of the voices echoing in from the room below.

"Nah, this room's all clear." A second voice shouted in response, as Gordon crept up to the edge of the grate, and peeked down through one of the slits.

He couldn't make out too much from his vantage point, which was situated about twenty-feet above the room. Just the tops of the heads of what looked like two human security guards, judging by the black tufts of hair on their scalps, and the navy blue uniforms trimmed in gold that they wore. The room appeared to be a small bar or day lounge. There was a narrow counter, and a number of plush, comfortable looking seats, positioned around small tables in the near vicinity.

"Well, let's move on to the next one, then." The first officer suggested, as he began to walk out of Gordon's field of view.

"Screw that. Let's take a break...!" The second one insisted, as he turned and walked around the narrow counter, slightly out of Gordon's sight. "I worked a full shift today before we took the ship, I need a drink. How 'bout you?"

"Eh, sure. Why not?" The first guard submitted, with very little reluctance, as he stepped up to the bar, and back into Gordon's sight. "I could use a drink. It's been dead on this deck anyway, I'm pretty sure we got everyone. Get me a... double shot of batarian ale."

"Get it yourself, I ain't your bartender!" His cohort admonished jokingly, hiding truth behind his ruse.

"...Asshole."

Both of them now stepped behind the bar, and searched through it's selection, for their drink of choice. The sound of glass bottles clinking together came, as they sifted, like scavengers, through the

bar's inventory, until finally finding what they each sought â€" indicated by the twin hiss of two caps being twisted off.

"What do you see...?" Miranda very softly questioned, as she rested behind Gordon, listening in.

"Small bar..." Gordon lightly whispered back, subtly turning his head, though keeping his eyes peering through the grate. "Looks like just two guards... It's too high to drop down from here, we should keep mov..."

"So when we're done here-" The voice of one of the corrupt officers chimed in again, interrupting Gordon, and causing him to listen in once more. "-we're just gonna let these people go? Just like that...?"

"Who said anything about letting 'em go?"

"The volus did..." The querying officer acknowledged, as the two continued their exchange, while sharing a drink - completely heedless to the presence of the three eavesdroppers high above. "He said once they gave up their accounts, they'd be free to go... Seems kinda stupid, doesn't it? I mean they're witnesses. They can ID us. And even in the Terminus, some of 'em are bound to have powerful friends..."

"Guess I was right about them heading for the Terminus systems..." Miranda whispered, listening, as she rested on her crossed arms, behind Gordon, to which he simply concurred with a subtle, foreboding nod.

"Idiot... He had to tell 'em that!" The other guard chided, as the two stood leaning carefree against the bar, knocking back the drinks in their hands. "What do you think they'd all do if they found out we were selling 'em to the batarians?"

"Batarians...?" Gordon queried in a low whisper, as he turned his head slightly to look back towards Miranda.

"Slavers..." She submitted, shaking her head with an angry scowl.

"Oh my god..." Cameron's appalled, muffled whisper followed.

"We're selling 'em to the batarians...?" The other corrupt officer questioned â€" sounding surprised, but not displeased, as the idle chatter continued below.

"Yeah, where've you been...?! There's a batarian cruiser waiting for us on the other side of the relay. Soon as we go through, they board, take hold of the passengers, and we live out the rest of our days as kings of the galaxy...!"

"Heh, I like that part...!" His compatriot blithely declared. "But what about the ones that aren't any good as slaves? The ones that can't work like the little kids, and the old fossils?"

"Hell, the four eyes'll pay double for kids...! Get more years out of 'em, and easier to get 'em into the life early. As for the geezers, I dunno... I guess we'll just have to put 'em down. Either way,

Commander Kim said there'd be no loose ends left. And we're milkin' this thing for all it's worth...! Heheheh..." "Heheheh..."

Gordon sneered, and furrowed his brow in anger, disgust, and contempt. He ground his teeth, and his icy chilled hands balled up into tight, bare knuckled fists, as the two below him shared a hearty, revolting laugh at their own debauchery, while clinking their bottles together in a toast.

"So what are ya gonna do when you get your share...?"

"I dunno... I was thinking I'd t..."

"HEY!" The loud, angry shriek of a new, female voice suddenly pierced the air, from somewhere out of Gordon's view, interrupting the two officers' leisurely repose. They immediately stood upright, leaving their bottles resting on the bar counter, as they both turned to look out in the same direction.

"What are you two doing?" The same voice demanded, sounding a little lower, but still exhibiting the same authoritarian tone. Just then, the top of a blue, fringed head, obviously belonging to an asari, stepped into Gordon's sight. "Is this room cleared yet?"

"Uh... Yeah, this one's all clear." One of the human officers uneasily answered. "We were just... takin' a quick break, that's all..."

"Well get back to work like the rest of us...!" The asari demanded, shaking a demeaning finger back and forth at the two humans. "We've still got this entire deck to sweep! Commander Kim wants us reporting that that ship is cleared of stragglers as soon as possible. And if he finds out that you two are slacking off, he'll have all our asses in a sling...!"

"Alright, alright, we're going...!" One of the human guards submitted compliantly, though sounding a fair bit irritated, as the asari turned around and wandered out of sight. Just then the second guard leaned closer to his accomplice, and muttered something inaudible under his breath.

"I HEARD THAT!" The angered asari yelled irately, from somewhere nearby.

"I-I said 'RICH'...!" The human mutterer tried to appease, as he and his compatriot malefactor both made their way out of the room, in the same direction the asari had gone. "'Rich!' As in 'we're gonna be rich!'"

"...So slavery still exists here." Gordon solemnly whispered, as he continued to peer down through the grate at the now empty lounge.

"Unfortunately, yes..." Miranda affirmed in a sombre tone. "And once they've taken hold of these people, they'll take them back to a slaver colony where they'll be branded, drugged, implanted with control devices, and sold throughout the Terminus Systems..."

"What kind of galaxy is this...?!" Gordon sneered through gritted teeth, struggling to keep his voice down. "We fought to stop the

things that would enslave entire races... And they're doing it to each other?!"

"...The slave trade is a major part of the batarian caste system..." Cameron unexpectedly supplemented, from her place behind Miranda "a dreary timbre in her voice, as she laid rubbing her hands together for warmth. "The Council's stand on anti-slavery is considered one of the many reasons that the batarians left their embassy, and severed diplomatic ties with the Citadel... It's so deeply rooted into their culture, that to them these won't be people... They'll just be a profitable acquisition..."

Gordon said nothing in response to the information presented to him. He simply laid there for a moment, resting his forehead on the back of one of his hands, as his eyes listlessly flicked back and forth, while the light from the grate painted his face with stripes.

Just then, there was a sudden, but subtle shift in inertia, as a very light, almost indistinct hum began to resonate from somewhere deep within the bowels of the grand ship.

"What's that...?" Cameron beckoned when she felt the delicate motion, and heard the gently muffled sound.

"The engines..." Miranda responded with a tinge of concern, as she turned her eyes upward, and tuned her hearing. "The ship's moving again... We're running out of time, we should get going."

As she spoke, Gordon simply stared down through the slits of the grate heedlessly. Suddenly, something manifested itself before his eyes... Something that was part memory, part imagination, and part déjà vu... There below him, in a nondescript corridor, stood two soldiers armed to the teeth, wearing black and white military camo fatigues.

"_I killed twelve dumb ass scientists, and not one of 'em fought back... This sucks!" _

"Gordon...?" Miranda queried worriedly, when she took note of the non-responsive physicist.

Gordon's eyes grew angry, as he stared down at the apparition from his past. The specter of those who would so willingly destroy the lives of others, for profit or pleasure, with little to no regard...

"...Gordon?"

"This can't happen..." He suddenly declared in a cold, determined voice. With a blink of his eyes, he looked back down at the room, and it was once again converted to nothing more than a vacated luxury lounge. Gordon rolled to his side in the duct, turning back and looking towards Miranda. "We stop this ship before it hits that relay... No matter what..."

"I'm with you." Miranda nodded, presenting Gordon with a tender, reassuring smile. "Where to from here?"

"Well..." Gordon began again with a bit of a sigh, as he turned back around to face forward, where their current path split into a T.

"We're at a juncture... We can go either right or left." He explained, as he looked back and forth between both darkened paths, like someone preparing to cross a street. "I have no idea where we are on this ship, but the right side slopes downward... The engine room would most likely be on the lower levels, correct?"

"Correct." Miranda confirmed.

"Then right's as good a guess as any, I suppose..." He ambivalently affirmed, breathing a dubious sigh under his breath.

He cautiously stretched his arm across the grate, and planted his palm on the other side, in the entrance of the downward leading, right-hand ventilation passage. He followed up by carefully bridging his entire body across, being prudent not to place any amount of excess weight on the grate itself, whose structural limits were unknown. As soon as he began to turn towards the right side opening, the icy breeze whistling through the vent shaft intensified, as a frigid gust blew against his face. He had to work a little harder now, maintaining pressure onto his hands so as not to lose friction's grip, and slide in. It wasn't a steep angle â€" perhaps a slight thirty degree slant, maybe less. But it was enough to feel gravity's burden.

"Watch your step here..." Gordon advised, as he inched his way forward, and down. "Careful not to put all your weight on the vent when you cross."

"Brrrrr-It's so c-cold!" Cameron, their meek reporter companion exclaimed, as a blast of cold air was funneled in her direction, after Miranda made her way through.

"Yep... This takes me back." Gordon offered up with a smack of his lips, sounding none too enthusiastic. "A pleasant sixty-eight degrees, my foot...!"

* * *

><p>"Bah!" A turian officer griped, as he rummaged through the drawers of a dresser in one of the lavish, first-class staterooms.<p>

His face was light brown in color, and both his mandibles, and the fringes on the back of his head were marked with streaks of white, while a pronounced stripe of deep red ran down the bridge of his nose, and the center of his face, dividing it in two.

Garments flew, as he sifted through them, and tossed them aside, after finding nothing of value. He carried a plain, black duffel bag, which hung at his side by a strap that was strewn across his chest to his shoulder. The mouth of the bag was unzipped, and hung open â€" no doubt to provide easy placement of any prized trinkets or valuables he might come across. The floor of the vacated room was littered with clothing and clutter now â€" everything from lush evening attire to seductive sleep wear, to the drawers of the dressers and wardrobes themselves, as the antsy guard would yank them out whole.

With his search of the vanity dresser proving less than fruitful, the turian then turned his attention to a mounted wall safe, the kind of which were not uncommon in rooms such as these, on the adjacent wall.

With a covetous glint in his eyes, he materialized his omni-tool, raised it, and placed his palm flat against the safe's red holographic input panel. Immediately, the the orange ring of light encompassing his hand began to spin back and forth, almost like the movements of a combination lock being undone. Within a matter of seconds, the holographic panel under his hand changed from a dissuading red, to an inviting green, giving him license to pull his hand away, and dematerialize his omni-tool. He reached up, pulled the handle, and the safe swung open with ease.

"Whew...!" He exhaled an elated sigh, and his face lit up with an indulgent gleam, as he beheld the reinforced safe cavity, bursting with valuables. "Jackpot...!"

Immediately in front of him, at the edge of the safe, were a number of credit chits, stacked up in a nice, tidy column. These were miniature devices, a bit smaller than twentieth-century credit cards, that could be endowed with varying monetary sums. Behind the small tower of chits, was a plethora of boxes and cases, lined with gold trim, and covered in a velvety finish " just the kind of boxes that were known to house precious jewels.

With an excessive eagerness, the turian held up his opened duffel bag, and scooped all the credit chits in with a single, sweeping motion of his arm. He then proceeded to remove one of the larger, black velvety cases, and quickly split it open. Sparkling with the radiance of a sky bejeweled by celestial twilight, a gleaming necklace, and matching pair of earrings, both encrusted with flawless diamonds, and precious rubies, sat on a pillow of mother-of-pearl silk bedding.

With a self-indulgent grin on his face, he quickly snapped the case shut, began yanking out every other box and case within the safe, and stuffed them into his bag " satisfying his greed, at least for the moment.

With the wall safe now completely purged of its treasures, the treasonous turian officer turned to make for the exit. But before leaving, something on the nightstand beside the bed caught his eye. As he approached it, he found it to be a magazine. On the cover, was a sultry, seductive, turian woman, laying disrobed, and sopping wet upon an exotic, alien beach, with her legs crossed, and one arm draped across her bare chest, as she held her opposite finger on the lower tip of her mouth. She had a bowed, narrow-eyed siren's gaze, which seemed to bewitch, and beguile, as her bare flesh glistened with the moisture of the waves washing ashore around her.

"Well, hello...!" The turian guard muttered in delight, as he quickly snatched up the publication, and began flipping through the pages, as he turned and made his way out of the room.

"Mmm-mmm-mmm...!" He let forth a lascivious series of hums. His eyes grew hungry, and keen, as he stepped out into the center of the Vista Deck main corridor.

"Hey, Cooke...!" He called out, into the room just opposite of the one he had emerged from, with his eyes still glued to the provocative imagery. "Cooke, come here a second."

"...What?" A human male inquired, as he stepped out from the room. He

was somewhere in his early to mid thirties, with signs of thinning, black hair, and a thick five o'clock shadow around his jawline. He wore a matching, blue, security uniform, despite the fact that the symbolism represented by the badge pinned on his chest had long since been shamelessly betrayed. And much like the turian, he also carried an open duffel bag at his side, slowly being filled with products of their avarice.

"Check it out." The turian insisted, with a vulgar grin on his face, as he positioned himself beside his human accomplice. "This month's issue of Fornax...!" He declared, as he held the magazine out in front of them "turning it sideways and allowing the pages of the centerfold to drop down, and reveal themselves in their erotic entirety.

"Oooh...!" He expressed emphatically, raising his eyebrows, as he held the magazine up, stretching the pages out completely with his hands, to eliminate the creases. "...How'd you like to explore HER uncharted space?"

Only for a moment was the human's attention captivated by the titillating publication, as his eyes practically bulged out of their sockets, before a shifty look overtook them.

"What're you, in high school...?! Gimme that!" He admonished demandingly, before he swiftly reached up, and snatched the magazine out of the turian's hands, leaving him standing with his hands still held up, completely dumbfounded. "We got work to do!"

"Well, sor-ry. Shit..." The turian scornfully retorted, as he turned away and waved a disparaging hand at his less than chummy human cohort. "Just thought you'd like to give your eyes a treat. My mistake..."

Cooke simply rolled his eyes, and shook his head, clutching the magazine in one hand, while the turian proceeded into the next room down the hall, to continue his plundering. The instant he watched his accomplice disappear into the room, the human covertly raised the spicy magazine back up, and deceitfully began to indulge in his own, private viewing.

No sooner had his eyes become glued to sensuous alien curves, than a faint sound in the distance unexpectedly drew his attention. He looked up, raising a perplexed eyebrow, as the obscured sound of music seemed to be coming from somewhere near the far end of the hall. Quickly closing the magazine, and rolling it up in his hands, he drew his sidearm, and slowly proceeded forward to investigate. The further he advanced, the more distinct the sound of music became, which turned out to be none other than the theme song from a long running television show...

"_Huah! Bad guys! Where you gon... Where you gon... Where you gonna go?!" _

"_When it's time to reap what you sew...?!"_

"_...Tell me!"_

"_Where you gonna go...? Where you gonna go-oh!"_

"_Ye-ah!" _

"_Bad guys, bad guys, where you gonna go? Where you gonna go when they're at your door?"_

"_Bad guys, bad guys, where you gonna go? Where you gonna go when they're at your door...?!"_

As the human officer reached the room, and began to turn in, with his weapon brandished, he could see the bright, colorful flicker of a turned on holovision screen, pulsating with the vibrant flashes of red, and blue.

"_C-SEC is filmed on location with the men and women of Citadel Security...! All suspects are innocent until proven guilty before a Citadel Tribunal." _

Cautiously entering the empty sitting room foyer, and turning to step into the bedroom, where the lights and sounds were coming from, he was suddenly stunned by the sight he found. There before him, sitting up in the unmade, king-sized bed, with her omni-tool pointed towards the HV, was a small framed, voluptuous figured quarian, donned in an exquisite, violet colored, silken evening dress.

"Oh...!" She exclaimed, feigning genuine surprise, once she noticed him. "I... don't remember ordering room service..."

"Uhm..." The officer uttered, with a furrowed brow and a dumbfounded countenance, before continuing. "...Alright, lady. I don't know how you got left behind-" He said, keeping his weapon drawn on the quarian. "-but you're coming with me... Get up, come on. Let's go."

"Oh, I'm not going anywhere..." Tali retorted, with a menacing cheerfulness, as she suddenly raised her opposite hand, which she had buried in the jumbled bed sheets, revealing a handgun of her own, which she swiftly aimed back at the human guard. "Not sure about you, though..."

Suddenly, before he could even react to the situation in any manner, the guard felt a sharp pain shoot through his fingers, as something powerful rushed up behind him, and twisted the gun out of his grip. The same force then jerked his head back, and covered his mouth tightly, before he could make a sound. All in one frightfully fast motion.

"Mmm...! Mmph! Mmmph!" Cooke let forth a series of panicked, muffled whimpers, as he felt the cold barrel of his own gun suddenly press against the side of his head.

"Shhh-Shhh-Shhh-Shhh...!" Shepard hissed quietly, urging silence, while keeping his strong left hand securely drawn over the guard's mouth, and holding a gun firmly to his temple, with his right.

Officer Cooke writhed and squirmed only for a second, before he was overcome with a petrified tranquility — his wide open eyes darting back and forth like a metronome.

"Do you wanna live...?" John impassively questioned, keeping his

prisoner solidly restrained, as Tali nonchalantly stood up off the bed, before him. "Nod if you wanna live..."

"Mmmph..." The traitorous officer hesitated for a moment, perhaps overcome with dread, as beads of sweat began to condense on his forehead, before he finally acknowledged the question, and nodded his head several times, adamantly.

"Good." Shepard affirmed agreeably. "Then listen to me very carefully... I'm gonna pull my hand away from your mouth... And when I do, I want you to tell me how many of you there are on this deck. How many of your buddies..."

"Now if you lie to me... Or try to call for help..." He continued, inciting a clacking sound, as he clicked the safety off of the pistol, and jabbed it a bit harder into the side of the officer's head. "You have my word that I will not hesitate to burn you down... I will kill you right here on the spot, and then finish up with your friends." He explained, whispering through his clenched teeth, in a cold, deadpan voice. "You understand...? Nod if you understand..."

Again, he hesitated for only a moment, before clenching his eyes shut, and rapidly nodding in cowardly desperation. Shepard could hear his whimpering breaths, and feel him tremble under his hands. Obviously, here was a man that had never really seen mortal peril â€" a man never before faced with the potential cessation of his own life, despite the willingness to destroy the lives of countless others.

"Alright, then... Quietly now..." He advised, as he slowly began pull his hand off of Cooke's mouth, and placed his arm loosely around his neck. "How many...?"

As soon as his lips were free, the panic stricken human guard began inhaling and exhaling rapidly through his mouth â€" a sign of his own fear.

"Uh... Uh-Wuh-One...!" He expelled, stuttering, and breathing heavily, as the Commander continued to hold the officer's standard issue handgun to the side of his head. "Ju-Just one other guy, besides me...! Rykus. A turian!"

"It's just you two...?!"

"Yeah..." He continued, in a throaty, trembling voice. "J-just two of us on looting duty, on each of the passenger decks. Th-There's a couple of crews doing thorough sweeps of the ship, but they're not here yet. And most of the others are on the deck with the hostages..."

"Hmm..." Shepard muttered pensively, while still restraining the human officer tightly. Tali had since taken a guarded position behind the bedroom doorway, should any unexpected surprises arise.

"Alright..." John began again, in a placated tone. "I believe you."

"W...What're you gonna do with me?" The nervous officer beckoned,

shifting his eyes from side to side.

"Nothing yet." The Commander casually asserted. "But I want you to call him..."

"...W-What?"

"Your partner..." He elaborated, tightening his grip a bit around Cooke's neck. "Call him in here... Pretend nothing's wrong and call him in, as if you need his help with something..."

"And then you'll let me go...?! Ack...!"

The officer spoke up with a sudden eagerness, before Shepard quickly squeezed tightly on his neck, momentarily restricting his air intake, and forcing him to gag a little. "You just do as you're told, and then we'll see." The Commander ordered stringently, showing little compassion for his prisoner, and rightfully so.

"Argh! Alright-alright!" Cooke agreed, in a coarse, froggy voice, with little alternative, as he found himself barely able to breath.

Having received his submission, Shepard loosened his grip around the corrupt guard's throat, just enough to allow him to vocalize clearly.

"Ugh-Ahem..." Cooke began, first clearing his throat of the rough, chalky sensation still lingering. "Uh... H... Hey Rykus...! Rykus!" He called forth, loudly.

A moment later, an echoing voice shouted in response, from somewhere down the hall. "...What?!"

"Hey, Co-come here a minute! Uh... I-I got something I need your help with!"

Fearing for his life, Cooke panted nervously, as he waited for a response, while sweat dripped off his forehead, and dotted the carpet.

"Yeah, yeah. Hang on, I'm coming." The acknowledgment finally came.

"Whew, there..." The captive officer stated, under a heavy sigh of relief. "He's coming..."

"You've been very cooperative." Shepard assured.

Just then, he withdrew the pistol away from the side of Cooke's head, and suddenly... THWACK! He slammed the barrel down hard on the back of the officer's skull, sending him careening to the floor, face down, with a thud.

Rykus sifted through the duffel bag at his side, with a big grin on his face, at the considerable haul he'd already managed to procure, while casually strolling down the long, elegant corridor to see what his partner in crime needed of him.

"Okay, what is it Cooke?" The turian officer petitioned, as he

approached the entrance of the stateroom that he was sure he'd heard his human accomplice's voice originate from. "Where are you...? What do you want?" He asked, as he placed his arms on either side of the entryway, and leaned in for a peek.

"Cooke...?" He continued to address, sounding a bit more concerned now after not receiving an initial response, as he warily stepped in, and looked around. "You in here...?"

"Cooke!" He abruptly shouted out, suddenly noticing the laid out officer on the bedroom floor, when he peered into the adjoined room.

"What the hell happened to you?!" He beseeched, as he darted in.

"I did!" A sturdy voice unexpectedly declared from behind the turian, startling him, and causing him to spin around with a jerk, only to be met with the ever so brief glimpse of Commander Shepard's piston-like right fist hurdling towards his face, just before the crunch... and the fade to black...

* * *

><p>It was quiet back on the bridge... At least for the time being. Leahr'Haan sat silently at the foremost station, succumb by the plague of his own thoughts, as he watched the stars streak by outside the windows, like blurs of light. The windows were surrounded by a light blue glow, generated by the enveloping of the ship in a mass effect field, as it traveled at speeds faster than light.<p>

And as he watched the stars " their brilliant reflections painted on his faceplate " part of him mourned for a life that had been lost... Not any on-board this ship, but rather his own... His own life had been lost, and he knew this. For he was now determined to see this mission through to fruition " or to his own death. And seeing this mission through to success, would mean the destruction of thousands of lives, and the forsaking of any remnant of his own soul...

But it didn't matter anymore... "Keelah Se'lai..." were the only words that resounded in his mind now, as though they were whispered to him by the ancestors themselves. "By the homeworld I hope to see one day... By the homeworld I MUST see one day...!" _

And so he mourned in silence... Because now, whether or not he'd lose his life here, he'd already sold his soul.

And while the lone quarian sat in tormented contemplation, the other occupants of the bridge weren't handling the situation quite as serenely. The two salarians who formerly stood as sentries, by the door, were gone now. Perhaps sent on a lackey's errand. Or more likely sent out to aid with the patrol, as a result of the latest developments.

Kargas, the burly, powerful leader of the ship's mercenary element, took to pacing around at the rear of the bridge. But it wasn't fear that had gripped him, or even concern. It was an anxiousness. Or to put it bluntly, a blood-lust... Like a starving, ravenous shark trying to pry it's way into a submerged cage, to feast on the scuba diver inside. So close, and yet so desperately unreachable...

Near the center of the bridge, in the small aisle between the inert, unmanned consoles, stood the cyclopean head of security, Commander Andrew Kim. He held a dwindling, lit cigarette pinched between his lips, and he looked somewhat edgy as his eyes scanned over the important looking datapad in his hand.

"Here it is..." He suddenly announced, in a voice drowned with dismay, as he pointed to something on the datapad screen. It was a long list of names, with one in particular brightly highlighted. "God damn it. Right here... 'Shepard, John' on the passenger manifest..."

"You mean you've had this manifest all this time-" Tarrik snidely admonished, while shaking a pudgy finger at the Commander. "-and you still had no idea Shepard was on-board?!"

"The manifest doesn't say his fucking military rank, Tarrik!" Kim snapped back, with a teeth-clenched scowl, causing the volus to apprehensively retract his finger. "It just gives me his name... Do you know how common a name like 'John Shepard' is for humans...?! Look!" He asserted, as he looked back down at the list on the datapad. "Here's another one... 'Jon Sheppard', spelled J-O-N, and with two P's in Sheppard... Oh and look... We got a 'Jean Shepard', and a 'Johnny Shepardson'... Ooh, here's an interesting one! 'Jontin Shaperdus'... No way that's human..."

"You think this is a game?!" Kargas' deep, bellowing voice suddenly snarled, as he stomped up towards the Commander in a huff.

It wasn't a reaction of fear that the enraged krogan incited in the human head of security, but rather a sense of keen apprehension, as he cautiously placed his hand on his holstered weapon, and left it there, while confronted by the krogan.

"We have, on this ship, the most dangerous man in the galaxy...!" Kargas continued, his warm, rancid breath whisking against Kim's face with every word, causing him to recoil and face away. "And you think to face him with a gallery of fools!"

"Fools?!"

"That's right, fools...!" The rabid krogan asserted, taking another commanding step toward's Kim, thus causing him to grip the handle of his sidearm tighter. "How well do you think your little police force is going to fare against the man who stopped the Reapers?!"

"...Look." Kim began, taking a calm, but stoic demeanor, as he locked eyes with the krogan, standing face to face with him, with a bolstered stance, and his hand on his gun, showing no sign of backing down. "I don't know what this beef you've got with Shepard is, that's got you so crazy... But your fight's with him, not me Karg... So I suggest you calm down... and back off...!"

"Is that a threat...?!"

"No, it's advice!" Kim retorted, snarling through his clenched teeth, with his hand still firm on the handle of his silvery heavy pistol. "So I suggest you take it, if you know what's good for you...!"

The two stared each other down, without so much as a glint of fear showing in either of their eyes. Kargas clenched his large, tri-fingered hands into a pair of wrecking-ball fists, as he growled under his breath, and snorted through his nose with the guise of a bull ready to gore its victim. Kim ground his teeth - his jaw fluttering from the pressure, as kept a pincer grip on his gun's handle, like a hissing cobra waiting for the moment to strike.

"If I may interject..." A nervous voice offered forth, under the hiss of a respirator, moments before the two brutes could tear into each other. They both turned, and looked down at the diminutive volus standing besides them, wearing a white Captain's cap. "Before the two of you start comparing the sizes of your guns - and I use that term figuratively - I think you BOTH need to calm down... Let's not forget the bigger problem at hand, shall we not...? I'm sure you two can find time to settle your petty squabbles later... AFTER we've apprehended Shepard, and neutralized any other threats on-board..."

"He's got a point, Karg..." Kim quickly acknowledged, with an uneasy sigh - hesitantly releasing the grip on his gun, and leaving it holstered, as he let his hand dangle at his side. "Now's not the time to start turning on each other..."

Kargas' yellow, reptilian eyes narrowed, as he snarled under his breath, giving the semblance of a hungry predator whose meal had just eluded him. Without a single utterance, he simply walked on, pushing past the one-eyed Commander, as if he were pushing through a swinging door, leaving Kim behind somewhat addled, but contented that the altercation didn't escalate any further.

"What the hell is his problem...?" Kim wondered with a whisper, as he watched the burly krogan stroll away, and return to watching the surveillance monitor.

"Kargas simply has a pension for the dramatic." Tarrik alleged, shaking his head dismissively. "Ignore him. Let's focus on the problem. Now... Back to the passenger manifest. How many of Shepard's people are on-board...?"

"Uh..." Kim stuttered a moment, as he raised the manifest he had forgotten he was holding, back up, and examined it closely. "...I can't tell..." He informed, as he began clicking the datapad screen with his finger. "Their ticket's must've all been purchased separately... But he did book a first-class stateroom for two, with someone..."

"Who...?"

"Doesn't say..." Kim continued to explain, as he exhaled a frustrated sigh. "The stateroom booking list just says 'John Shepard +1'... Could be anyone on this god damned list..."

"Blast...!" Tarrik muttered, with a shake of his head, and a hiss of his breath. Just then, something else occurred to him.

"Wait... Check for the name of that other earth clan..." Tarrik instructed, as he looked back up at Kim. "That uh... Freeman character."

"Oh, for crying out loud, NO!" The fog-eyed Commander refused, with an adamant outburst. "I already told you, Gordon Freeman's as dead as Julius Caesar...! Unless his fucking ghost is floating around somewhere, he's not on-board this ship!"

"You may not keep up with current events, Commander, but I do... And it so happens that I recall Shepard making a vague mention of someone by the name of 'Freeman', during his acclaimed speech on Earth, last week." The volus purporting to be Captain elaborated, in a calm, deadpan tone. "So just... check."

"Argh, fine! If it'll shut you up..." Kim griped, rolling his eyes, as he brought the datapad back up, and began scanning through it with his eyes. "I'm looking... I'm looking..." He uttered in a highly cynical tone, as he skimmed through the long list of names. "Freebury... Freehill... Freemm-" He paused for a moment, choking back his words, as he suddenly came across a name he didn't expect to find. There, brightly highlighted on the datapad in front of him, in bold, orange letters... FREEMAN, GORDON.

"-Mman..." He finished his utterance, as he looked back down towards the volus, with an uneasy look in his eyes. "Hmph... Okay, fine. There's _'a'_ Gordon Freeman on here... I'm sure it's a pretty common name too. It doesn't mean that some two-hundred year old, dead war hero's walking around on this ship..."

The hiss of Tarrik's respirator came before his response. "Unless you can be sure of that... I wouldn't take any chances."

"I'm sure of it." Kim asserted, with full conviction. "But whatever. Doesn't matter. We know Shepard's here. That's where my focus is right now... I'm putting everyone on high alert..."

"I'd suggest, Commander Kim, that you caution your men not to pursue or engage Shepard, should they spot him..." Kargas' deep, powerful voice unexpectedly interjected, causing both Kim and Tarrik to look towards the krogan, who simply spoke up, without actually taking his eyes off the monitor in front of him.

"What...?" Kim beckoned, perplexed, as he took a few short steps towards Kargas "€" stopping a few feet behind him. "...Why not?"

"Your men aren't trained to handle a situation like this..." Kargas declared, as his eyes panned back and forth between the various security feeds on the large screen before him. "What did they get...? A two day crash course in security training...? Detect, deter, and report? Something like that?"

"Hey, now wait a minute..."

"No..." The krogan placidly continued "€" finally turning his head to look back at his one-eyed accomplice. "It's good. Let them report it... Tell them any stragglers that they may spot are to be considered extremely dangerous... Should they come across any, warn them not to pursue... not to engage... Simply stop, and radio for back-up. Because I promise you Commander, if they don't... they'll end up just like every other person, including my own Blood Pack bothers, who thought they could stand up to Shepard as warriors..."

Dead."

"You know..." Kim began in response, raising a perplexed eyebrow. "For someone who's really got it out for Shepard... You talk as if you admire him..."

"Hmph..." Kargas chuckled under his breath, before turning his head back towards the screen. "That's because I do." He stoically affirmed. "I admire his strength... His tenacity... His krogan-like affinity for combat... It doesn't mean I loathe him any less..." He explained â€" his agitated tone quickly growing resentful and filled with a deep rooted hatred. "The very MENTION of his name instills the blood-rage within me!" He exclaimed in an outburst of anger, as he leaned forward onto the terminal, and bowed his head in an effort to contain his rage. He paused for a moment, breathing in and out, as he attempted to retain his self-control, with Kim and Tarrik looking on.

"Well, you're getting yourself all worked up over nothing..." The uniformed Commander assured, with a shake of his head, though exhibiting a nervous tinge in his voice. "I told you, Shepard's unarmed and unarmored... We can handle this... As soon as we isolate his location, we simply seal off whatever deck he's on, and trap him...! After that, it's just a matter of figuring out the best way to deal with him..."

"Besides..." He continued - his voice succumb with the ambivalent timbre of a man trying to convince himself, more than his peers. "How do we even know if the bastard isn't just cowering in a hole somewhere...?"

"Shepard...? Cower...?! Puhh..." Kargas scoffed disdainfully at the notion, as he shook his head slowly.

"I'm serious..." Kim continued, now beginning to pace in a small circle, as he looked back and forth between Kargas and Tarrik â€" perhaps hoping to gain their concurrence. "Look... Except for one of my guys getting a bar stool wrapped around his head by some random passenger in the Nirasha Lounge, and that little fracas with Shepard's crew earlier, it's been pretty damn quiet since we took the ship..."

"And how do you know it wasn't Shepard himself who bludgeoned your man...?" Kargas challenged, never turning to face the Commander, his attention instead still invested on the screen before him.

"Because all the exits were covered." Kim rebutted. "There was no way out of that room except for getting pushed out with everyone else... It wasn't Shepard. OR Gordon Freeman!" He immediately declared, quickly pointing a finger down at Tarrik. "Before you bring THAT up again..."

"Hmph..." The krogan snickered under his breath, causing his chest to pulse a little. "Well, I hope you'll still be as confident when Shepard bursts through that door behind you, and kills everyone in this room who doesn't have the benefit of tertiary organs, or a redundant nervous system..."

Commander Kim gulped a little, as he instinctively turned to examined the closed, metallic, bridge door leading to the other parts of the

ship. He couldn't help himself from imagining the door suddenly flying open to reveal a hardened man donned in dark N7 Marine armor, wielding a blazing assault rifle that mowed down everything in its path.

"The fact that it's been quiet, Commander, is what you should be most afraid of..." Kargas' voice continued â€" startling Kim a bit, as it was unexpectedly closer now. Kim turned back to find the krogan standing before him. His beastly yellow eyes reflected an elder warrior's wisdom. But also something more... Something depraved...

"Respecting your enemy does not mean underestimating them... You'd do well to remember that..."

15. Chapter 15: Kresha

Salvation: Episode I â€" The Taking of the Carmenta Illustria

Disclaimer: This fan-fiction is part of an episodic series taking place after Salvation: A Half-Life/Mass Effect Universe Fan Fiction, which will lead directly to its sequel, Salvation II: Project Prometheus. These episodes and sequel take place OUTSIDE of the Mass Effect 3 continuity. Characters property of their respective companies, Half-Life created by Valve and Mass Effect created by Bioware.

Chapter 15: Kresha

Tali pushed a few personal effects out of the way, as she rummaged through the bottom drawer of the dresser provided in their prestigious, luxury stateroom. It didn't seem so luxurious anymore though, as her boyfriend lugged the limp body of an unconscious turian, whose hands were now bound behind him with his own handcuffs, into their spacious bedroom closet, to join his already cuffed human accomplice. They were both still out cold, and their mouths had been gagged with a thick, brown, satin cloth, which was likely a former pillow case, given the barren white pillows on the bed â€" A precaution to keep them silent, should they awaken anytime soon.

"Umph...!" Shepard grunted, still aching a little from his injuries sustained on Xen, as he dropped the turian into the closet floor, like he was dropping a sandbag, causing him to land with a loud thud.

"You've always got such a way with people..." Tali put forth, with a playful sarcasm, after hearing the crooked guard plop onto the floor, as she pulled a medium sized, metallic case, about the size of a large dictionary, out from the bottom of the drawer.

"They're damn lucky I don't kill them...!" Shepard affirmed with a scowl, sounding somewhat ambivalent over his merciful adjudication.

He raised his hand up to the closet door panel, slid the door shut, and activated the lock. Meanwhile, Tali carried the case she had sought over to the bed, and laid it down besides the two fully

equipped gun-belts that had been stripped from both of the guards, and strewn across the mattress.

"These men aren't mercs or soldiers..." He continued with a mixture of anger and frustration in his voice, shaking his head, as he turned away from the closet door to face Tali.

"They're..." He paused for a moment, sighing, as he searched for the right word, before finding it, and blurting it out. "Incompetent...! They don't even know enough to clear the corners of a room before rushing in... And did you see how scared he was...?!" Shepard stopped, and hung his head, as he sighed, and placed his hands on his hips. "Killing them just doesn't feel right... Too much like killing civilians..."

"For as long as I've known you John, you've always only killed when you had no other choice..." Tali chimed in, looking upon him with tender eyes, as she watched him seemingly struggle with his decision. "It's one of the things I adore most about you."

"Yeah..." Shepard concurred, looking back up and nodding resolutely as he quickly regaining his steadfast demeanor. "I got no moral conundrums here, though. I won't flinch or regret it for a second if I have to put any of 'em down... This was their choice, they made it."

"Anyway..." He continued after a brief pause, approaching the bed, and looking on, as Tali unlatched her case. "You find what you were looking for?"

"Yep...!" She assured, as she split the case open like a book, revealing its full contents. "Everything a traveling quarian needs to be prepared for ANY emergency..."

Inside, fitting snugly in the custom fitted bedding, was a variety of foreign looking tools, and devices. Some of which Shepard instantly recognized from the carrying cases Tali normally wore around her waist.

"You weren't kidding..." He said with a grin. "Do you thi..."

Suddenly, before he could finish his sentence, Shepard was interrupted by a crackle of static in his ear, coming from the communicator he'd appropriated earlier from Officer Strenners.

"Hear this, all personnel..." A cold, jaded voice began to announce, with a sense of foreboding, as Shepard placed his hand to his ear, for better sound, and quickly pointed out one of the other two communicators lying on the bed, besides the two confiscated gun belts, to Tali.

"This is Commander Kim speaking..." The broadcast continued, as Tali plucked the tiny bud communicator off the bed. She pulled back the side of her veil a bit, revealing a small empty slot on the side of her helmet, which she quickly occupied with the communicator, and listened.

"At this time, I caution everyone to be on alert for the presence of at least one highly dangerous individual loose on the ship..."

The warning caused the two to share a brief, ambivalent glance, and also caused Shepard to raise his eyebrows, and shrug his shoulders indifferently, as the message continued.

"All stragglers are henceforth to be considered extremely dangerous. Should any of you happen to spot one... Stop and radio your location immediately. Do not, I repeat, do NOT attempt to capture, engage, or pursue... Hold your location, and wait for backup to arrive. This situation is not to be taken lightly, and I expect these orders to be followed explicitly. From this point forward, I want all personnel checking in with their team leads at five-minute intervals... And I want status reports from the team leads themselves at ten minute intervals. Also... Be advised that there are a number of security mechs currently being deployed throughout the ship."

"Mechs..." Tali uttered with a frustrated grimace behind her mask, as she and John shared another uneasy glance.

"These mechs are simply an auxiliary precaution, and are to be ignored. They will not interfere with your duties, as they've been programmed to recognize the biometrics of all security personnel as friendly. So once again... Everyone is to be on full alert. No screw ups. You spot a straggler, you call for backup. No exceptions. Check in with your team leads at five minute intervals. Team leads, check in with me at ten. So I expect my first report in ten minutes. Commander Kim, over and out."

"I think we've officially overstayed our welcome." Tali stated sarcastically, as the radio transmission was ushered to an end by the scratch of static.

"Yep..." Shepard nodded in agreement. "No way I can get away with trying to imitate these two... We got ten minutes, tops. Time to go."

He quickly removed the tuxedo jacket he had still been wearing, and discarded it onto the bed, leaving only the white dress shirt he wore underneath in its place. Working quickly, he took up one of the two gun belts laying on the bed, and began affixing it around his waist. As he attempted to fasten it, he was suddenly surprised to hear a loud ripping sound, like that of fabric being torn apart.

When he looked up, he was greeted by the sight of Tali fervently tearing away at her once exquisite, shimmering satin evening dress, with her bare hands. She ripped her sleeves off, and tore at the seams where she could find them. And where she couldn't, she just pulled the fabric apart until it was in shreds. As the tattered remains of her former gown began to fall to the floor, the bare environmental suit that no quarian was ever without, was revealed underneath. One might say it was somewhat symbolic in a way; a dress ripped to shreds, like a vacation torn asunder.

Symbolic or not, John couldn't help himself from finding a nice bit of delight in watching her ravage her own clothing like that. But now was hardly the time for an intimate foray he realized, as he shook the idea out of his head, and quickly finished fastening the gun-belt, complete with a magnetic dock for his commandeered sidearm, around his waist.

With her dress now completely in shambles on the floor, Tali began selectively taking the various devices from her case, and affixing them to her person. Some of the tools fit into pockets and pouches hidden on her suit. Others were attached to belts, which she strapped around her thigh, her waist, and a few on her arms, above her elbows.

Unlike Shepard, who without his armor was forced to carry this low-grade ordnance around via gun belt, Tali's suit was designed with a built-in weapon's dock. There was a slot for her favored, and all too missed, shotgun across the small of her back, room for rifles parallel her shoulder blades, and a handy spot for her newly acquired pistol on her hip, which she quickly utilized. Everything a traveling quarian needs to be prepared for any emergency, indeed.

"Uh... N-need any help with that...?"

"Mmm, you should've asked me sooner... I'm all done." Tali remarked in a teasingly seductive voice, as she secured her weapon to her holster, thus completing her transformation. "But I'm sure I could use some help later, when it comes time to... take it off..."

She stood there looking more or less the way he was accustomed to seeing her now. No dress, no flowers, no frilly lace. Just her tools, her suit, and her decorative veil. The only things missing were the knife she normally kept strapped to her ankle, and her weapon of choice, her shotgun, across her back.

The courageous Commander, on the other hand, appeared quite contrary to his normal visage. Instead of possessing the protective shell of his durable, military-grade N7 armor, or a lethal selection of high-tech armaments, he only had his white tuxedo shirt, black dress pants, glossy designer shoes, and a single standard-issue security pistol. But on his clean-shaven face, which still exhibited a number of slow healing contusions, and sutured wounds, a look of determination and resolve was still branded on.

"Heh, absolutely..." He replied with an eager nod. "Let's move out."

They both made their way out of the room, and proceeded down towards the north end of the long, spacious, luxurious hallway, walking side by side with a purpose.

"Alright..." John began, as the two continued forth at a brisk pace. "So we'll make our way down to the source of the communication disruption, and try to get the word out to the Alliance so they know what's happening here..."

"I've got most of what I need, now." Tali affirmed, confidently. "Shouldn't be a problem."

John nodded. "Once that's done, our next best move would probably be to try and make our way up to the bridge, and retake it. Covertly if possible..." He said with a sigh, sounding frustrated and exhausted from the notion alone. "If all else fails, at least the Alliance will know what's happened. But I've got no intentions of dying here... Not after everything we've just been through..."

"Oh, I hope all our vacations don't turn out like this..." Tali

muttered, with a discontented shake of her head. "Maybe next time we should just stay on the Citadel."

Shepard chuckled under his breath a little, as they continued on. Suddenly, the grin on his face disappeared, and his steps came to a grinding halt, as he stretched his arm out in front of Tali, stopping her in her tracks as well. His brow furrowed, and his expression was overcome with a wary look, at the feeling of eyes on his back. Tali felt it too, if a moment later, and she quickly realized what he had already concluded... They were being watched.

Without so much as a whisper between them, they stood absolutely still for a split second, when suddenly, utilizing near super-human speed, Shepard yanked the pistol off his hip, and spun himself around with a jerk, aiming his weapon before it even had a chance to fully extend in his grip. Despite his quickness, as he turned towards the south end of the hallway, he was only able to catch a brief glimpse of a figure... a shadow... an outline... which quickly retreated into one of the vacated staterooms.

"...Did you see that?" Shepard queried softly, keeping his weapon aimed, as his focus remained on the room.

"I saw... something..." Tali dubiously replied, with her own weapon drawn and aimed in the same direction.

With a tilt of his head, he silently motioned for her to follow, as he slowly began encroaching upon the room that the mysterious figure disappeared into. Reaching it, they quickly pressed their backs against the wall just beside the open doorway, with their weapons primed and raised. He glanced over at Tali, using only his eyes to ask her if she was ready. And using only a nod, she confirmed that she was.

The grip around his pistol tightened as he held it up, and readied himself. He turned his head, and moved it to the edge of the doorway "peering into the seemingly empty room. With his initial assessment complete, he swung himself around, and stepped into the room, weapon first. Nine, twelve, three o'clock, he quickly panned across the sitting room with his gun in a sweeping motion, looking for any movement or abnormalities.

Just then, as Tali followed closely behind, covering his back, they both suddenly heard the distinctive sound of an automatic door sliding shut, coming from the bedroom. They both immediately reacted, swinging their weapons around, and aiming them towards the source of the sound. With the sitting room scouted, Shepard made a slow, tactical advance into the bedroom. Again, as he entered, he immediately swept across the room with his weapon.

With no initial threat found, Shepard signaled Tali, pointing two fingers towards the sealed closet door, on the right wall of the room, which was the only automatic door in the vicinity. Treading lightly, with the tactical prowess of accomplished assassins, they approached the closet door, while remaining fully vigilant, and aware of their surroundings.

When they reached the door, Tali reached out towards the holographic panel, and glanced over at Shepard. Using the same silent method of communication as before, he readied his weapon, and gave her the

go-ahead with a nod. Tali activated the panel, and the door flew open.

"AHHH! AHHH! AHHH!"

"What the hell?!" Shepard exclaimed in shock, as he suddenly retracted his weapon from the screaming, whimpering little figure huddled in terror, within the closet.

"It's a child...!" Tali declared, sounding equally stunned.

"Please! Please don't take me away!" The black haired little human boy, no more than eight or nine years of age, pleaded frantically, in a terrified, shrill, shrieking voice. His cheeks were soaked with tears, and his small chin trembled uncontrollably, as he huddled at the far end of the closet. "Don't take me away like you took everyone else! I'm sorry I was bad! Please give me back my mommy and daddy!"

"Hey-Hey! Shhh! Shhh! It's okay...!" Shepard urged, quickly holstering his weapon, as he waved a hand in front of him, trying to soothe the traumatized boy. "It's okay, we're not gonna hurt you! We're the good guys, okay? We're not here to hurt you."

"Y-You... You promise...?" The little boy beseeched, with a trembling voice, and a quivering lip. "You're not gonna take me away like the people those bad policemen took? Please don't take me away too."

"I promise... We're not gonna take you away, okay...?" The Commander assured, in a soft, consoling voice, as he crouched down to the little boy's level. "But you're not safe here. You have to come with us."

"Mmm-ph..." The frightened child sobbed, as he shook his head adamantly, and took a timid step back, nuzzling himself against the rear wall. "No, the bad policemen are out there!"

"Don't be scared, little kresha..." Tali supplemented, in a sweet, tender voice, as she knelt down beside Shepard. "What's your name?"

"M... Matthew..." He replied, with his head tucked squeamishly between his shoulders, and his little hands balled up over his chin. "Matthew Farrell... But my mom always calls me Matty..."

"Matty... That's a nice name. And for such a handsome little boy." She declare, in a sweet and flattering tone of voice. "My name is Tali, and this is John. Would you mind if we called you Matty, too?"

The small boy looked shyly away from Tali, but at the same time politely shook his head, granting his permission.

"Okay, Matty..." She continued, in a voice teaming with compassion and tenderness. "Now you say the bad people took your mommy and daddy away...?"

"Mmm-Hmm..." He nodded, still sighing and whimpering a little, under his breath, but showing a noticeable rapport towards Tali, perhaps due to her motherly disposition. "It was the bad policemen... Daddy

told me policemen help people. But they weren't helping... They were scaring people... Hurting them...!"

"I know, I know, kresha..." Tali offered up, sympathetically. "But we're gonna get them back for you, okay? I promise... We're not gonna let the bad policemen hurt you, or your parents..."

"...Really?" Matty beckoned, as he looked up at Tali, with his teary eyes lit up. "You'll get them back...?"

"Really..." She assured, as she extended her hand towards the child. "Come on..."

As she waved him over, John simply looked on, from his place crouched at her side. He always knew how tender and sweet she was. But he he never knew how nurturing or motherly she could be. It was a heartwarming discovery that brought a subtle smile to his face, as little Mathew reluctantly stepped out of the shadowy closet, and took Tali's hand. At that moment, his grin quickly dissipated, when he made out the faint sound of something rapidly approaching. It was the sound of motorized movement, accompanied by rhythmic stomps.

"Shit..." Shepard uttered to himself, as he quickly stood up, and rushed towards the door. "Stay here...!" He ordered, looking back at Tali. "Keep him safe. I'll be right back."

Tali nodded, holding onto Mathew's hand, as she quickly stood up.

With the child's protection in mind, Shepard bolted towards the stateroom entrance, and leaned his head out, peering into the hallway. All clear by the looks of it, but the sound was growing closer and closer, sounding like it was coming from the staircase where they were previously headed. Thump, buzz... Thump, buzz... Thump, buzz... came the sound â€" a metallic stomp, followed by a mechanical whirr.

Just then, before he could retract his head, it turned the corner at the end of the hall, after having stepped out from the stairway door, and began it's march into the long, empty corridor.

"Halt." The lone mech ordered in a robotic, monotonous voice, immediately detecting Shepard with it's cybernetic instrumentation, as it clunked it's way towards him. "Armed civilian detected. You are ordered to drop your weapon immediately and follow me to a designated holding area. You have ten seconds to comply."

"Damn...!" The Commander muttered through his teeth, as he took two slow steps out into the center of the hallway, with his hand reaching towards his hip.

"You now have five seconds to com..." POW! The sound of a gunshot heralded the eruption of the mech's robotic head, as it exploded into a flurry of sparks and cybernetic debris.

â€"

"Wait a minute!" Leahr'Haan called out on the bridge, as a flashing alert on his private terminal suddenly caught his attention. "Hey...!"

Something's wrong here! Something's going on...!"

"What is it?" Tarrik queried, walking toward Leahr's console, as the quarian quickly went to work punching keys into his laptop.

"I-I'm not sure..." Leahr responded nervously, as he summoned a status screen on his monitor. "One of the mechs just went offline..."

"What?!" Kim exclaimed, as he darted towards the fore of the bridge, with Kargas quickly following.

"How?!" He demanded - the three quickly crowding around the quarian techie.

"I don't know..." Leahr explained, as he worked frantically. "But it won't reboot. I'm showing a critical system failure. That can only mean the unit's hardware was destroyed or damaged beyo..."

"Where?!" Kargas' monstrous voice suddenly entreated, promptly cutting the quarian off. "What deck?!"

"Uh..." The quarian stammered, as his fingers pounded away on the holographic keys. "Th-This one was dispatched to uhm, uh... level seven! Vista Deck!"

"Seal the deck doors!" Kim ordered, with the utmost urgency. "Now. Do it!"

"R...right!" Leahr acknowledged, as he swiveled his seat around away from his laptop, to the ship's main console, and went to work straightaway.

"Attention all hands!" Kim called out, with two fingers pressed to his ear. "This is Commander Kim. All units converge on the Vista Deck. I repeat, converge on the Vista Deck immediately!"

Similarly, Kargas was already on his radio as well. "Teshya, Davix, come in... This is Kargas, do you copy?" He paused for a moment, waiting for a reply, which actually came rather expeditiously. "Yeah, we think we just marked him..." He announced, with his large krogan hand to his small krogan ear. "Seventh level. Vista Deck... Go get 'em."

â€œ

"We gotta move!" Shepard urged, as he rushed back into the room, where Mathew stood huddled close to Tali's leg, with her hand at his back. "Now!"

"What was that shot?!" She beckoned.

"Took out a mech..." He explained to her, as he approached the boy. "Won't be long before this deck is swarming..."

He quickly came up to Matty and crouched down before him. "Matthew, listen to me..." He began to explain in a calm, yet pressing tone of voice. "We're gonna get your parents back, okay? But right now you have to come with us... I won't let anything happen to you, I swear it. But you have to trust us, and do exactly what we say, alright...?"

Can you do that...?"

The frightened, black haired little boy didn't yield a verbal response. Instead with his eyes still watery, his lips still trembling, and his head still tucked timidly between his shoulders, he submitted with a nod.

"There's a good boy...!" Shepard assured with a mild grin, as he stood back up, and rubbed his shoulder. "Just stay close to Tali and me, okay? Come on."

The Commander turned to lead the two out of the room, keeping his gun in its holster â€" doing so perhaps solely to put the boy's mind at ease, despite his overwhelming instincts to keep it drawn.

"Okay, it's clear..." He declared, as he did a quick check of the hallway. "Let's go."

He bolted out of the room, towards the north end of the corridor, with Tali and Matty in tow, hand in hand. The little boy seemed completely dependent on Tali now, and so very fragile, as he held on to her tri-fingered hand as tightly as his little grip would allow, while they dashed down the hallway. They quickly reached the end, and turned the corner into the short hall leading towards the staircase door where they originally entered.

"Oh, no! No! NO!" Shepard exclaimed in dismay â€" shocked to suddenly find the door to the stairway sliding shut, as he quickly sprinted towards it.

"Damn it!" He shouted, as he reached it â€" pounding his fist against it, after being unsuccessful in getting to it in time.

"What's happening?!" Matty beseeched in a shaky voice, starting to tremble a little, as he observed the situation, and the Commander's agitated state. "Are the bad policemen gonna get us?!"

"No." Shepard asserted, with conviction, as he spun himself around towards Matty, and quickly scooped him up in his arms.

"Come on!" He shouted to Tali, as he hoisted the boy up, and took off towards the opposite end of the hallway. Like a pair of Olympic runners, the two raced down the hallway as fast as their legs would carry them. However, Shepard staggered a bit as he ran â€" still exhibiting a pronounced limp from his recently wounded leg.

"Oh, son of a...!" John snarled, when again they turned the corner, only to find a sealed door there to greet them.

"They've got us trapped..." Tali uttered, with an alarmed sigh.

With little Matty still in his arms, Shepard turned to Tali, hoping for some good news. "Can you get it open...?!" He beckoned.

"Yes... But I'll need time. The doors were sealed remotely, and they've disabled the holo-panel..."

"Do what you can..." He urged, trying to mask his concern.

Tali nodded, and immediately went to work. She rushed towards the

door, and knelt down beside it. With a seemingly instinctive knowledge, she worked her fingers near the bottom edge of the doorway, and suddenly began peeling away at the elegant, hand-painted, cream colored wallpaper covering the wall beside the door, to reveal a small maintenance panel. She quickly tore off a large piece of the wallpaper, and discarded it, before unlatching the panel, and pulling it away to reveal an amalgam of wiring and circuitry.

"What's she doing...?" The inquisitive little boy asked, from his place perched on Shepard's arm, with his arm around the back of his neck.

"She's gonna try to get the door open for us." The Commander responded.

"So we can go find my mom and dad?"

"That's right." Shepard amicably assured. "But first we need to go downstairs so we ca..."

"John...!" Tali called out, with a high degree of alarm in her voice, as she motioned him over with her head.

"Stay close, Matty." He instructed, as he swiftly put the boy down, and rushed towards the door.

"Listen...!" Tali insisted, as he crouched beside her. Taking her advice, Shepard tuned his hearing, and pressed his ear against the door. On the other side, the clambering sound of stomping footsteps, and a faint series of muffled murmurs could be heard.

"They're amassing outside the door..." He proclaimed, a heavy tinge of concern now prevalent in his voice.

"It'll probably be the same on the other side, too." Tali stated, with a damning shake of her head. "They're going to try to box us in, and overwhelm us..."

"Not if I can help it...!" He muttered, as he turned, breezed past Matty, out into the center of the main corridor, and began taking a frantic look all around. "There's gotta be another way out of here... A hatch... an access panel, something!"

"_I can't risk a shootout while we've got this little boy with us..."_ He pondered to himself, with his lips clenched tightly, as he attempted to formulate some sort of plan. _"There's gotta be same way out of here..."_ _

Matthew looked on worriedly, breathing rapidly, and slowly starting to quiver, as Commander Shepard paced around, scanning the surroundings of the corridor from floor to ceiling. Just then, he felt something touch his shoulder. When he looked up, he found it to be Tali's hand, as she stood beside him, looking down with a reassuring warmth in luminous her eyes.

"Don't be afraid, kresha. It's gonna be okay..." She assured, as she took him by the hand once more, instantly soothing his anxieties.

"John..." She called out, as they both approached her frantic, frustrated beau. "What if we gather the furniture from the rooms...? We'll keep the little one hidden in one of the staterooms, while we set up a defensive barrier in the middle of the hall, and make our stand."

"I don't think we're gonna have a choi..." He began to admit, as he looked up at Tali, and suddenly spotted something behind her. "The elevator!" He exclaimed, as he suddenly bolted past her, towards the end of the hall, and the sealed elevator doors.

"But it's offline...!" She argued, as she and Matty followed closely. By the time she reached him, Shepard was already busy trying to work his fingers into the crevice where the two elevator doors met.

"Doesn't... matter... Hruah!" He declared through his teeth, with a throaty grunt, as he slowly began to pry the two stiff doors apart, causing a grinding sound. He widened the gap further and further, until both doors were almost completely open, revealing the dark, empty elevator shaft within. With his work done, he leaned in a little, still holding onto the doors, and spotted deliverance â€" a maintenance ladder, running the entire height of the shaft, bolted to the inside wall, directly to his left. "We can still climb...!" He announced â€" turning around with a sly grin on his face.

"Come here..." John said amicably, as he crouched down to Matthew's level, and extended his arm towards him.

Although exhibiting a hint of reluctance, it didn't take long for Matty to trustingly step forward, into Shepard's reach. Once again, the Commander scooped him up, and stood up, with the child on his arm, as they turned towards the opened elevator doors.

"Are we gonna go in there...?" Matthew questioned, hooking his small arms around John's neck, and trying to remain brave, as they peered into the dark, seemingly bottomless abysmal pit.

"Yes we are." Shepard calmly affirmed. "Just hold on tight to me, okay...?"

Wasting no time in taking his advice all too literally, Matty quickly tightened his grip around Shepard's broad neck, and buried his face into his muscular shoulder, like someone who's afraid of the dark hiding under their blankets. With a subtle, soft grin on his face, as the little boy clung on to him tightly, John turned towards Tali. "Time to go..."

"I'm right behind you..."

â€"

"So what's going on here...?" A brown haired, female human in a security uniform queried, as she rushed up the stairs, towards a sizable group of her armed peers already crowded around the door, each of which standing by with their sidearms primed and ready.

"Commander Kim's got those stragglers trapped on this deck..." A fellow male human officer at the rear of the group explained,

momentarily turning his attention away from the door, to address the woman. "Soon as he opens the doors and gives the order, we're gonna rush in and take 'em down."

"Not that I think you could-" A firm, arrogant, male voice suddenly asserted, accompanied by the sound of two sets of footsteps descending from above. "-but our orders are to take this... 'straggler' alive..."

Nearly the entire company of security officers crowded by the door turned to face the source of the inexorable voice. On the flight of stairs just above them, descending on their location, with a slow, purposeful stride, were two serious looking mercenaries, both donned in dark red, battle-scarred, Blood-Pack armor.

"We go in first, got it?" Teshya supplemented, as the two reached the bottom of the steps, near the sealed door to the Vista Deck, causing most of the security personnel there to clear a path for them, and give them ample space. "The rest of you pyjaks follow our lead, and provide us with support. But stay out of our way, and let us handle things in there."

Just then, a bolstered salarian stepped out from the group, and approached the two mercs. "Now just hold on a minute..." He began, shaking a finger in both their faces. "We only take orders fr-from..."

The salarian was left stuttering, and speechless, as Davix suddenly pulled a hefty assault rifle off his back, which expanded in his hands to an even greater size â€" a weapon easily dwarfing any standard-issue handgun the security personnel were equipped with. Concurrently, Teshya's eyes and hands lit up like balls of cerulean flame, as she pulled her trusty rapidfire SMG off her hip â€" not a weapon of excessively intimidating stature on its own - but when coupled with an asari shimmering with a biotic fury, it was enough to stifle even the bravest of opponents.

"Uh... Right! Yeah, whatever you say...!" The salarian stammered nervously, as he slowly stepped back into the crowd of guards that now surrounded the turian and asari mercenaries. "W-We'll just... follow your lead..."

"Spineless wretches..." Teshya sneered through her teeth, with a look of disgust, as the glow around her hands faded away.

"Davix to Kargas..." The turian transmitted, as he pressed his finger to his ear, holding onto his assault rifle with his opposite hand. "We're in position."

â€"

"Understood." Kargas affirmed into his communicator, with his hand against his ear, as he stood observing the surveillance terminal. "Stand by to move in."

Removing his hand, thus closing the open channel, Kargas furrowed his brow as he watched the screen, and called the one-eyed head of security over. "Commander."

"Yeah...?" Kim responded, with a tinge of nervousness in his voice,

as he approached the krogan. "Good to go?"

"My people are in position." Kargas asserted with a nod " never removing his gaze from the screen, however.

"Mine too." Kim echoed, as he placed his hands akimbo on his hips, clenched his lips, and gave a firm nod. "I'll give the order. Let's put an end to this."

"One moment..." Kargas instructed, putting a halting hand up beside him, as he watched the terminal with something clearly on his mind. "Something is amiss..."

Kim stepped up beside the krogan, and joined him in observing the monitor, at the unsettling suggestion.

"You said the Vista Deck, right...?"

"That's what the suit rat said." Kim acknowledged, crossing his arms. "Why, what did you see?"

"That's just it..." Kargas began to explain, in a completely addled tone of voice. "I've seen nothing... I have not taken my eyes off of the Vista Deck feed since we sealed the doors. But there has been no movement... No activity... I see no bodies, nor any wreckage of the mech... It's just... empty..."

"Bastard's probably hiding out in one of the rooms..." Kim declared nonchalantly, as he shook his head, and slowly began to turn away. "Tell Davix and Tesh to be careful..."

"Quarian!" He called out towards the front of the bridge. "Open the doors."

"All units-" He then said, as he pressed two fingers to his ear. "-Move in...!"

"

Davix and Teshya, the turian and asari Blood-Pack mercenaries primed their weapons, and clutched them tightly, as the doors slowly began to slide open " taking on the guise of an elite commando squadron preparing to venture in to enemy occupied territory, to retake it.

As the door continued to slide open, the first thing through was the muzzle of Davix' large silvery assault rifle. Working together as a seasoned unit, the two emerged into the narrow hallway tucked away into the corner of the far reaching deck, and scanned for hostiles. With the immediate vicinity cleared, they bolted towards the edge of the main corridor " spanning from one end of the deck, to the other. With his back pressed against the wall, he peeked his head out ever so slightly, finding nothing but the desolate, abandoned hallway.

"Clear!" Davix declared, after not spotting a soul. He then motioned forward to Teshya with a pointed finger. "Move in!" He ordered, as he swung himself around, and stepped into the seemingly empty hallway.

The two took point, cautiously moving forward at a slow, steady pace, with their weapons brandished in front of them, and their fingers resting on their triggers, while the other officers followed closely behind. At the far end of the hallway, a second troop of officers burst onto the scene, weapons drawn, only to be brought to a screeching halt by the sight of Davix immediately raising a stringent hand out in front of him - ordering them to stop, like a crossing guard directing traffic. As the two came to the first set of doors, on opposite sides of the hallway, they each took identical positions by the doorways, with their backs against the wall. In the same fashion as before, each of them checked their corresponding staterooms for hostiles by first taking a fleeting glance in, followed by a more thorough check, by taking a wary step into the room.

"Secure these rooms!" Teshya called out to the guards behind them. "And keep those exits covered!"

Their initial appraisal of the threat in the first set of rooms did in fact prove benign, but a more scrutinizing scan of each of the rooms they'd clear would of course be necessary. And so on they continued... Canvassing the entire hallway. Surveying every room, every corner, every nook. And the further, and further on they went, the more painfully obvious it became... There was no rat caught in _this_ particular trap.

16. Chapter 16: Updraft

****Salvation: Episode I â€" The Taking of the Carmenta Illustria****

Disclaimer: This fan-fiction is part of an episodic series taking place after Salvation: A Half-Life/Mass Effect Universe Fan Fiction, which will lead directly to its sequel, Salvation II: Project Prometheus. These episodes and sequel take place OUTSIDE of the Mass Effect 3 continuity. Characters property of their respective companies, Half-Life created by Valve and Mass Effect created by Bioware.

Chapter 16: Updraft

Cameron's body shivered, her jaw trembled, and her teeth chattered, as she followed Miranda's silhouette through the dark, blustering air duct. She held her illuminated omni-tool out before her, doing her best to subdue the rattling of her teeth, as she narrated their exploits. "W-We have learned... th-that these agitators... Th-these b-blackguard brutes, that once d-dared ca-call themselves k-keepers of the peace... wholly intend to traff-ff-ffic their captives to an outf-fit of batarian s-slavers w-w-waiting for the ship out in T-terminus S-ssystems..."

"I f-find myself s-ssickened, by s-such depraved, de-deplorable acts. But more th-than that... I f-find myself c-c-cold...! S-so very cold...!" She had to struggle against the quivering of her own jaw to force each individual word out. "As w-we continue f-f-further and further into th-this cramped, eh-endless network of-f aluminum tunnels, the air has b-b-become fr-frigid, and pi-pitiless... I feel as th-though I am clambering through a f-fr-freezer. With each passing second, the p-perpetual sting of the hyp-p-perboreal winds

benumbs my face."

Despite her intolerance of the cold, her diligence as a journalist was commendable. But as she continued detailing the latest passage of her chronicles, she moved her omni-tool closer to her mouth, and began again with a modest whisper.

"I do f-find comfort in o-one thing, however..." She said. "The true Gordon F-Freeman's jaunts through s-sewers and vents are as famous as Washington's crossing of the D-Delaware River... I w-wouldn't say I'm at all c-convicted that the man currently leading us IS in f-fact the real Gordon Freeman... Bu-but I do find comfort in entertaining the thought. S-silly as it m-may be..."

As Cameron concluded her account, Gordon soldiered on at the fore of the group, on his hands and knees. True to her report, the icy frigid air stung his face, as the howling, torrential winds blew past him, in the narrow, metal shaft. His nose and ears were numbed, his cheeks were stinging, and the air from his lungs hung in the wind, with every breath he took, like puffs of steam. But despite the biting cold, which he had all but become accustomed to during his 'tour' of the Black Mesa ventilation system, an enticing bluish light at the distant end of the tunnel roused him forward.

"There's an opening up ahead!" Gordon called out, addressing his two female traveling companions, as they pressed on, behind him. "Hopefully it'll be somewhere we can get our bearings, and figure out what our next step should be."

"And hopefully somewhere I can stretch my legs...!" An annoyed Miranda groused, as she crawled behind Gordon, struggling to keep her stinging palms from slipping on the freezing metallic surface, which was now covered in a very thin layer of frost. "I don't know how you've managed to do this so many times."

"Eh, cold doesn't really bother me..." He proclaimed, as they drew closer to the brightly lit opening. The beguiling light seemed to glow brighter and brighter with every inch they traversed. But there was also a churning, whirring sound, coming from the hole, which wasn't nearly as inviting. "I used to love winter time in Seattle... Hated the New Mexico heat."

"I... d-d-don't like c-cold cl-climates...!" Cameron interjected as her teeth chattering like a wind-up toy, as she continued to shiver profusely. "I gr-gr-grew up on C-Caelum Prime... I-it's warm there... S-ssunny... I H-h... h-hate the c-cold...!"

"You still with us, Miss McClane...?" Gordon queried worriedly, trying his best to look back, over his shoulder, while still proceeding forward. "You don't sound so good..."

"The s-s-ssooner we c-can g-ge-get outta here... the b-b-better...!"

"Well, just keep thinking those warm, happy thoughts of home..." Miranda suggested, with a tinge of sarcasm. "I'm sure you'll be fine..."

"Yes-s... W-warm... H-ho-home... Ss-s-stupid h-h-hijackers!"

Gordon chuckled a bit at the remark, as he continued to make his way forward. The opening was mere feet away now, but the sound that emanated from it was growing to a near deafening level, as the frigid winds blasted past them. But with everything he'd already been through, and with everything that was at stake, the good Doctor was not about to be intimidated by the inner ramblings of this magnificent ship.

Gordon reached the edge of the air duct, squinting his eyes a little, as the icy breeze stung his pupils. His head was the first thing to emerge into the clearing, as he looked beyond the threshold of the duct, and scowled in frustration.

"Ohh... Great." Gordon griped, as he shook his head, and looked down.

The duct opened up before him into a massive, cylindrical, silo-shaped chamber. The walls of which were lined every which way with a multiplicity of tubes, wiring, and piping â€" some running vertically along the inside wall of the towering rotunda, others horizontally, and others still running straight across â€" connecting from one side of the rounded wall to the other. A lot of the pipes and tubes looked weathered and old, showing cracks, splotches of rust, and other signs of decay. But most of it seemed to be in working order, as many of the problem areas were braced with metallic patches and seals.

There were also a vast number of openings along the walls. Air duct openings, just like the one he was currently in the process of emerging from. They speckled the chamber wall in a grid-like formation, like the windows of an office building. Gordon could only infer that this was some sort of center chamber for the ship's air conditioning system, as directly below them, about fifteen to twenty feet, was the object of his grief. A colossal mechanism, working with enough power to generate the gale force winds of the arctic itself, and spanning nearly the entire width of the chamber â€" some thirty to forty feet in diameter. It was a terrible, and unnerving sight, despite it being a sight he had been faced with many times in the past.

"What is it...?!" Miranda beckoned, from her place behind Gordon, as she tried to peer around his shoulder, after watching him shake his head in dismay.

"It's a fan...!" Gordon shouted back, over the thunderous rumble. "A really big fan...!"

It's blades were enormous â€" a centrifugal blur spinning fast enough to generate a powerful updraft. The light in the room seemed to be radiating from a set of large, brightly lit, glowing blue coils, nestled within the inner wall, just around the fan. They seemed to pulsate, and hum with energy, as they bathed the entire room in a sky blue hue.

"So what do we do...?" Miranda asked, putting her faith in the man who obviously had the most experience with these types of situations.

"Hmm..." Gordon muttered pensively, as he panned his gaze around, examining the room, and weighing the options.

As he did so, he suddenly spotted something useful on the opposite side of the chamber, directly across from him. It was a small steel-grate platform, probably utilized by the ship's maintenance personnel. On the wall above the platform was a control panel of some sort, which seemed to house a plethora of readouts, buttons, and a large, red, emergency power-off switch. Directly beside the control panel, bolted to the inside of the wall, and leading all the way down past the colossal fan, was a maintenance ladder. It wasn't easy to see what lied beyond the depths of the spinning fan blades, but Gordon could definitely make out a shadowy gap in the wall, which appeared to be another entry way of some sort. The ladder was far reaching, and descended a long way down. Getting to it would mean getting that much closer to the lower levels of the ship, and their intended destination - the engine room. The only visible problem now, was that the only way to reach the other side of the silo, from where they were, would be to traverse a very narrow steel ledge, which circumnavigated the entire chamber, and was only about a foot and a half in width.

"No sense in going back now...!" A determined Gordon declared, as he slowly crawled out of the air duct, and onto the narrow ledge. After all, it wasn't as though this was the biggest fan he'd ever seen. Not by far. But it was one of the most menacing.

Very slowly, and very cautiously, he rose to his feet, with his back pressed against the wall - minding his footing on the ledge that was barely wide enough to support the full length of his glossy, black shoes. His dust covered, buttoned up, tuxedo coat flapped wildly in the breeze, as he stood up, and slowly began to sidestep the air duct opening, to the right, clearing the path for Miranda to emerge. Following his lead, she too reared her head, and looked down in, shock, at the churning beast of a fan below them.

"Whoa..." Miranda mumbled, aghast, as she slowly crept out of the hole. "This must be the ship's central AC ventilation shaft...!" She shouted, over the sound of the whirring fan, and howling wind, as she cautiously stood up beside Gordon, with her back pressed firmly against the wall. "How are we going to do this?!"

"We can skim this ledge all the way around to that ladder...!" He yelled in response, as he motioned with his head towards the platform on the other side. "So long as we mind our footing, and take it slow, we'll be alright...!"

Miranda reluctantly gave a clench-lipped nod, as she stood looking down at the massive fan, with a look of uncertainty on her face. Just then, she felt something take her hand, which she had held pressed against the wall. When she realized it was Gordon now holding onto her tightly, any feelings of unwillingness quickly melted away, as she looked up at him, and squeezed back.

"I've always had to do things like this alone...!" Gordon shouted over the blustering howl, with a warm grin on his chilled face. "It's nice to have some company...!"

"I've heard stories about your expeditions through vents!" Miranda yelled back, reciprocating a tender smile. "Is this normal for you...?!"

"What...? Giant, spinning, fans of death...?!"

"Yes...!" Miranda replied, uneasily. "That...!"

"Sadly, yes...!" Gordon affirmed with a mild chuckle, as the two kept themselves pressed completely flat against the wall behind them. "But don't worry...! Fans I can handle! It's trash compactors that make me nervous...!"

Miranda smiled and tittered a little under her breath, as two slowly began to shift across the ledge, hand in hand, with their backs sliding along the frigid wall.

"Your turn, McClane!" Miranda shouted, as they shimmied out of the way, to the right. "Just step out slow and easy!"

With the path before her now clear, Cameron timidly crawled to the edge, shivering, and trembling, as she slowly peeked her head out, and looked straight down.

"Oh... O-oh my god...!" She exclaimed, in a dizzied fright, as she immediately receded back into the hole, like a scared rabbit into its burrow. "I-I... I can't do this!"

"Yes you can!" Gordon quickly reassured. "Trust me! It's easier than it looks...! Just take your time, there's no rush...!"

"Ohh...!" Cameron grumbled, filled with dread and uncertainty, as she slowly inched her way out once more, doing her best to muster up a flurry of courage. "Are you sure about this...?!" She pleaded, as she teetered beside them, with her hands clinging tightly to the narrow ledge.

"You're doing fine, Miss...!" Gordon affirmed. "Just stand up very slowly and carefully, and keep your back to the wall!"

Heeding his advice to the letter, Cameron wobbled a bit, as she strategically found her footing, and gradually rose to her feet — exhibiting the acute concentration of a tightrope walker about to step out onto the line.

"There you go!" Gordon commended, as she suddenly stood upright, and immediately glued her back to the wall, with her arms slightly spread out. "That wasn't so hard, was it?!"

Cameron exhaled, and inhaled droves of gasping breaths, as she tried to avert her eyes from the fan below. Her heart raced inside her chest, as the cold, angry updraft whipped her hair around, and pinned the rippling slack of her dress against her body, and the wall, as it did to Miranda.

"Oh my g-g-g... I-I s-still don't know if I can d-do this...!"

"You could always go back...!" Miranda nonchalantly suggested, mostly as a joke, but at the same time sounding somewhat earnest.

Cameron turned her head, and looked at Miranda with a wide eyed gaze, at which Miranda simply gave a subtle shrug.

"J-j-just pr-promise you won't go too fast...!" She begged, as she

pressed her head back against the wall, clenched her eyes shut, and took a deep breath.

"We won't!" Gordon yelled, over the furious gusts. "Just take your time, and mind your footing! You'll be okay!"

With Miranda's hand firmly clutched in his, Gordon cautiously began to shimmy across the ledge, at a slow, creeping pace, one step at a time. They skimmed along, towards the right, in a counter-clockwise direction, relative to the silo-like chamber. As Gordon and Miranda moved along, Cameron was wary to take her first step, as her entire body shook and shuddered. She couldn't tell anymore if it was the cold that rattled her teeth, and made her skin crawl with goosebumps, or if it was the overwhelming sensation of terror that she was fighting desperately to overcome. Closing her eyes again, for a moment, and gulping back at the bile in her throat, she took a deep breath, and slowly slid her right foot along the ledge, followed by her left. With her first step a success, she released a hefty sigh of relief, and her face actually drew a small, albeit nervous smile.

And so, as the ancient proverb goes, just as a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step, so too must begin a treacherous journey of a few feet, traversing a narrow ledge, suspended above spinning, man-eating blades. Right foot. Left foot. One step at a time, the three shimmied along the ledge, having little difficulty. Frankly, the hardest thing to endure was the blistering cold, and harsh winds blasting against their faces.

"See...?!" Gordon cheerfully called out, as the three eventually reached the half-way point. "Nothing to it!"

"Only you could say that at a time like this...!" Miranda anxiously retorted, unable to help herself from glancing down at the massive fan spinning in the pit below them. "Do me a favor! Let's not make this a regular thing...!"

"You did say you wanted our first date to be a memorable one...!"

Miranda scoffed, and playfully rolled her eyes with a cheery, apprehensive grin, as the three continued along. Meanwhile, Cameron simply focused on resisting the incessant urge to look down. But she was finding it easier to tread the narrow ledge now — much easier than she'd imagined it would be. She even breathed a sigh of relief, as the maintenance platform they were striving towards actually seemed reachable. A few striding steps and they'd be there! — "Oh, so close!" — She must've been thinking to herself, teeming with desperation, as her steps began to grow antsy. If only to be there already, instead of perched upon this precipice of demise. Almost there... It won't be long now...!

"Whoa-Watch it, McClane!" Miranda shouted irately, wobbling a bit after nearly losing her balance, as a result of a nudge from the anxious reporter. Gordon quickly clutched her hand tightly, helping her to regain her momentarily loss of stability.

"I-I... I'm sorry!" Cameron quickly apologized, as she took a rigid step back. "I j-just wanna be off-AHHHH!" Her harrowing shriek suddenly echoed throughout the chamber, as a stray patch of frost

unexpectedly claimed her footing. She toppled down, off of the ledge â€" her arms waving and flailing about, grabbing for anything they could reach, when without warning, Miranda felt something snatch onto her hand, and drag her down as well.

It all happened so fast! First Cameron, then Miranda, and Gordon held on all the while.

"Miranda!" He screamed, fortifying his stance and tightening his grip on her hand, as she was suddenly swung off the ledge. But in that instant, as his arm whiplashed downwards, he too was suddenly dragged off, with a jerk. Despite both their slender physiques, their combined weight proved too much for him alone to resist.

"ARRGHHHH!" He groaned in agony, through gritted teeth â€" his eyes clenched shut, as he suddenly felt something tear within his own arm, as if rending his flesh.

"AHHHH! OH MY GOD! HELP! HELP!" He could hear a woman screaming in the distance, like an echo, over the deafening sound of whirring fan blades. It was like a daze... a dream... His entire sensory system was completely overwhelmed by the disorienting, excruciating pain coursing through his arm.

"Gordon...!" He heard another voice call out to him. A more familiar voice, mired with dread, but more than that, affection. "Gordon, are you alright...!? GORDON!"

He suddenly opened his eyes, with a gasp, to the sound of his name, and took a frantic look all around. There, below the ledge they traversed, was a thin metallic pipe, spanning its length. It was perhaps through instinct, and instinct alone, that he had managed to grab it on his way down. He clutched it tightly in his vice-like right hand, as he hung, facing the inner wall of the silo-shaped chamber. But his grip, powerful as it may be, could only sustain so much, and was slowly slipping.

His left hand and Miranda's right were still interlocked, as she held onto him tightly, gazing up at him with a look of both fear, and concern in her eyes. Below her, with her feet dangling just above the massive meat grinder, the horrified blonde journalist whimpered and screamed for her life, as she held onto Miranda's left hand with both of hers, having latched onto it after slipping. And there they dangled â€" all three holding on for dear life â€" links in a rapidly weakening human chain.

"Oh god! Help! Help me! Pull me up! PULL ME UP!" Cameron pleaded and begged, as she kicked and flailed about in terror, shaking and straining the entire chain.

Every motion was a new twinge of pain coursing through Gordon's arm, as if the sinewy tissue itself was being stretched and torn apart like strands of rubber. His face was etched in torment, as a profuse sweat began dripping off his forehead, despite the bitter cold, and lashing winds. It took every ounce of strength and fortitude he could spare simply to keep his hand from slipping.

"STOP MOVING!" Miranda demanded, with a ferocious snarl, as she glared down at the flailing, thrashing reporter, after observing Gordon's anguished state.

Almost immediately, McClane heeded Miranda's order, and simply let herself hang listlessly, at the end of the fair skinned brunette's arm. Maybe she was more afraid of the operative above her, than she was of the fan below her. Whatever the case, it got results.

Gordon ground his teeth. He clenched his lips and his eyes shut, and groaned a heaving, agonizing groan, as he tried desperately to pull himself up with his languished right arm â€" a sadly futile effort.

"Ugh...!" Gordon released a pained sigh, as he let himself hang limp once more, by his trembling limb. Determined, and wasting no time, a fiery resolve came over him, as he ignored all the pain in his body, and tried again. "Mmmmmmmmmph! Agh...!" But again, to no avail. In spite of his best efforts, he couldn't lift them an inch. He couldn't even flex his elbow under the weight, and his strength was going fast.

"Gordon, you can't lift us on your own!" Miranda shouted, as she watched his desperate struggle to save their lives.

"I hav... I have to-mmmph!" He asserted, as he sneered, and tried again.

As Miranda watched him, helplessly, suddenly something began to drip down onto her hand, from his. It was a crimson trickle of his blood, dripping out from under the metallic cast he was still wearing on his left forearm.

"Oh, god...! Gordon, your arm!" She exclaimed, as the scarlet droplets slowly began to accumulate, and roll off of her hand. "Your wound's been re-opened!"

As she watched him, his face perpetuated in agony, while he tried again and again to desperately pull their collective weight up, she suddenly closed her eyes, and began to focus. Channeling every bit of force she could rally, her hands suddenly began to flicker with a blue biotic flame. But it only lasted for a moment, before quickly dissipating. Sharing his persistence, she took a deep breath, and tried again. Her hands shimmered with the cerulean glow, but only for a second, before it began to flicker and die, like a light bulb on the brink of burning out.

"Argh! I can't use my biotics without my hands free!" She announced, as she looked up at Gordon, who now just hung there, trying to keep himself from losing his grip. Just then, she turned and looked down at McClane. "Let go!" She shouted.

"ARE YOU CRAZY?!" Cameron screamed in response â€" her eyes opened wide with alarm, as she clung to Miranda's hand, without the slightest intent to let go.

"Just ho... Just hold on, Miranda...!" Gordon begged, with a series of gasping breaths, sounding utterly and completely exhausted.

The slow, scarlet trickle of blood coming from under his cast gradually grew into a branching stream, like the water running out from under a leaky pipe joint. The crimson streaks slowly spread around his hand, and began to run down Miranda's arm like twisting

vines.

"Gordon, stop!" She demanded pleadingly, as she watched his bleeding accelerate. "We're gonna tear your arm off, you have to let us go!"

"What?!" He exclaimed in shock, at the appalling suggestion, as he looked down at Miranda, and the ominous propeller below her. "But you'll die!"

"I... I'll try and shield us before we hit the fan!" She explained, without a shred of certainty in her voice.

"There's no way you can put a barrier up that fast!" He retorted, adamantly shaking his head. "Especially not without your amps!"

"I have to try...!" She affirmed, in a voice that grew mournful and shaky, as she looked up at Gordon as if it could be the last time she would ever see him again. "What else can we do?!"

"Just hold on to me!" He pleaded desperately, as he looked up and began to scan the area for anything at all he could use. "Come on, not like this!"

In his frantic search, he suddenly spotted a small, rusty pipe running horizontally along the inside wall. Perhaps he could use it like the rung of a ladder, and give himself some much needed leverage. All out of options, he quickly swung his legs forward, causing a jolt of pain to shoot through his exceedingly strained arm. But it also brought a miniscule amount of relief to his right hand, which had bared the entire weight of the three of them. Breathing heavily, he allowed himself only a moment's rest, as Miranda looked on, with both fear and admiration in her eyes.

Taking a deep breath, Gordon clenched his eyes and lips shut, and pushed against the pipe with everything he had, as he slowly began to rise, like a mountain climber scaling a cliff wall. "Mmmmrph!" He let forth an anguished, throaty grunt. His arms trembled violently, and his face was soaked in a cold sweat, as he actually began to slowly pull himself, and the two women up.

Just as the whisking hairs on the tip of his head began to peek up over the ledge, like the sun rising over a horizon, SNAP! The thin pipe below his feet suddenly gave way, and he plunged once more!

"ARRGH!" He cried out in agony, as his arms were jerked under the weight, causing his grip to loosen, and leaving them dangling once more.

Suddenly, he heard a loud, grinding noise, resonating from below. Doing his best to ignore the pain, he looked down, and watched as the fan's blades screeched to a crawl. The section of piping that had broken off tumbled down into the path of the blades, and wedged itself in them. POW! It was a momentarily abeyance however, as the powerful fan suddenly snapped the pipe in twain, swallowed it whole, and sped itself back up to full velocity.

Upon his observation, he raised his head, and his eyes began to flutter back and forth in their sockets. He was suddenly

anesthetized, as he became oblivious to everything except the machinations of his own mind.

"Gordon, you have to let us go!" Miranda beseeched. "You have to let me try and put up a barrier! There's nothing more you can do!"

"No, he can't let us go!" Cameron supplemented hysterically. "Please don't let us go!"

Heedless to either of their words, and with a flimsy strategy now in mind, Gordon began scanning the area around him once more. That's when he spotted it. A few feet to his right, coming out of the wall, and running vertically towards the top of the chamber, was another pipe just within his reach. This one was considerably larger, and thicker than the one he previously tried to support himself with, but that was the point. He also zeroed in on a vulnerable spot â€" a brown patch of crusted oxidation.

POW! A loud bang echoed throughout the chamber, as he suddenly swung his leg towards it, and kicked at the rusty patch with his foot, causing no visible damage. POW! Again, he kicked at it, this time cocking his knee up further, adding more force behind the blow, and leaving a minor, but visible indentation.

Again and again, he reeled his leg back, and slammed his foot into the rust marked pipe, as if it had a bulls-eye on it. But each time, his blood oozed, his strength was sapped, and his grip ebbed a tiny bit further. POW! With his next kick, a thin stream of some sort of vaporous coolant began shooting out of a newly created fissure in the pipe.

Relentlessly, he continued to kick at the pipe again and again, widening the crack further and further, and causing the vapor within it to jet out like the blast from a fire extinguisher. Until finally, with a sneer of determination and pain, and a jade fire in his eyes, POW! One final blow, and the pipe snapped in two, leaving it teetering off the wall, spewing vaporous exhaust. He swung himself towards it once more, but instead of kicking at it, he placed the entire weight of his feet on top of it, and pushed down. Slowly the pipe began to creak, and bend down from its jointed socket in the wall, until finally, success! With one hearty stomp of his shoe, the large, thick pipe snapped off, and tumbled down into the path of the fan blades.

The colossal propeller spat out flurries of sparks, as the pipe slammed against it. The roaring sound of steel grinding against steel reverberated throughout the room, as the large metal pipe seemed to bounce around within the fan's inner workings. Small explosions erupted, as some of the blue cooling coils surrounding the fan were suddenly destroyed, and smashed to bits and debris. Like a giant catherine wheel firework, the fan spun around spewing a fiery ring of sparks. Just then, without having shown the slightest sign of deceleration, the fan came to an abrupt, screeching halt, as the pipe wedged itself between the blades and the wall. It could still be heard creaking, grinding, and bellowing like an angry beast wanting to break free of its restraint.

At that moment, Gordon's bloody grip around Miranda's hand went completely limp. It wasn't a decision, just pure exhaustion. The fall to the fan wasn't a long one, especially not for Cameron, but they

both still landed onto the inert metal blades with a thud.

"O-oh my god, we're alive!" Cameron exclaimed with a mixture of jubilation and disbelief, as she laid flat on her stomach, clinging to one of the colossal blades.

"Slip through...!" Gordon shouted out from above, in a pained, groaning voice, dangling from a debilitated arm, as the fan continued to creak and grind against the obstruction. "Quickly!"

"What about you...?!" Miranda beckoned, as she sat, looking up at him.

"I'll be right behind you. Go!"

"Come on!" Miranda ordered, as she began to slide down, on her back, through one of the openings between the blades. Cameron nodded, as she too quickly began trying to worm her way through one of the gaps, sliding through head first.

Within seconds, they both squeezed through, and dropped down below the massive blades, onto the crosshatched steel floor. Miranda managed to land on her feet, but McClane on the other hand, all too eager to escape, simply flopped out, onto her back.

Just then, the fan slowly began to rotate once more, as it ground against the metal pipe stopper, which began to crumple and give way under the strain.

"Gordon, hurry!" Miranda shouted up, through the blades, with her hands cupped around her mouth.

Once he saw the women were clear, Gordon's grip simply gave out, allowing him to plummet down, and land hard on his back. The fall for him was a good deal longer than it was for Miranda and Cameron. Though not enough to inflict any sort of serious injury, it was still was enough to disorient him, and leave him in a temporary stupor.

"Ughhh..." Gordon moaned groggily, as he clutched at his head, with his right hand, and slowly sat up. Just then, he thought he could feel the floor shifting beneath him. And it wasn't even a floor, but rather some sort of cold, uncomfortable platform of flat, thin protrusions. His eyes flew open, when he suddenly remembered where he was. The grinding grew louder, and louder, as he watched the thick, metal pipe bend, and crumple directly in front of him. And at that instant, snap! Before he could even move, the pipe was severed like a twig. Gordon clenched his eyes, and turned away, as this was surely the end. _"Let it be quick!"_ His subconscious echoed, as he realized he was about to be maimed and mangled.

But, as he peered into the darkness of his closed eyelids, expecting mutilation, he realized nothing had come. No death, no pain, no movement even... Reluctantly, he cracked his eyes open to investigate. He wasn't dead. That was his first conclusion, as he realized he was still sitting on the blades of the fan. But it was still grinding under him. He could feel it's vibration, as it tried to kick in again, despite the pipe being completely gone now. But there was something else... A blue glow... Not from the remaining cooling coils around the fan, no " this was radiating from the

blades themselves. They were illuminated. Enveloped.

"Gordon, I-I can't hold it for long!" Miranda's strained and labored voice unexpectedly echoed in the chamber, from beneath the immobilized fan.

Gordon shuffled around, and peered through the blades to see her standing below, with her trembling hands aglow, held out above her head. He quickly moved to squeeze through the blades, when he suddenly cringed in pain â€" finding it difficult to move or outstretch his left arm and virtually impossible to grip or form a fist with his left hand. Instinctively he kept his arm curtailed, as he continued trying to squirm his way through the shimmering blue blades.

After slipping through, his feet landed onto the metallic floor below, with a clang. But he was unable to maintain his balance, and instantly collapsed onto his back, writhing, and clutching at his forearm, with a pained look on his face.

"Unhh..." As soon as he was clear, Miranda exhaled a heavy sigh, and let her arms drop as if there were iron weights tied to her wrists. Without her bio-amps, sustaining any sort of biotic field required twice the concentration, and became ten times as arduous. She hunched over for a moment, taking a few fleeting seconds to catch her breath, as the released fan above their heads rapidly began whirring and accelerating back towards full speed.

Just then, she looked over towards Gordon, and spotted him trying to sit up, with his arm still clutched. "Gordon...!" She uttered under her breath, as she quickly rushed to his side.

"Gordon, are you alright?!" She beckoned, as she dropped to her knees beside him, and draped her hands around the sides of his face.

"Yes, I'm okay...!" He assured in a pained, flustered voice, trying to speak over the once again thunderous fan, as he sat up, and nodded gently. "I'm alright, don't worry...!"

"You stupid, stubborn, ass!" She blurted out, reflecting a mixture of relief, anger, and joy, before she suddenly lunged towards him, with her hands on his shoulders, and bestowed a tender, emotional kiss.

"Heh heh heh..." Gordon chuckled mildly, with a large, tired grin on his face, when she pulled her lips off his and, in turn, embraced him tightly. "I told you fans I could handle..."

"I never doubted you...!" She assured, squeezing him tightly, and caressing the hair on the back of his head in a tender, uncharacteristic show of emotion.

"Oh yes you did..." He replied, with a cheerful snicker under his breath, as he reciprocated her embrace with only his right arm.

"Oh my god...!" A stunned Cameron interjected, as she approached the two. The mere sound of her voice suddenly brought a look of detest and outrage to Miranda's countenance, as she slowly let go of Gordon.

"You... You saved us!" The shaken reporter continued, exhibiting genuine gratitude, and a newfound reverence for Gordon. "You saved our lives! You... You really ARE Gordon Freeman, aren't you?!"

Rather than placate her awe-struck praise with a verbal response, Gordon simply chuckled, and gave a subtle shake of his head, as he sat there, trying to recover.

Without warning, Miranda rapidly spun herself around, away from Gordon, ignited her right hand, and aimed it towards Cameron, as if she were aiming a loaded gun. The only reaction the humbled reporter had time enough for, was to draw her mouth agape in shock, as she was suddenly engulfed in the blue luminance, and immediately sent flying back against the far wall.

"Ahh! W-Wha?!" She cried out, moreso from surprise rather than pain, as she abruptly found herself pinned up against the wall, enveloped in a glimmering blue pocket of energy.

"Miranda!" Gordon exclaimed, in shock, as he quickly tried to stagger to his feet, after her.

Meanwhile, Miranda kept her illuminated hand out in front of her, keeping the frightened journalist pinned and helpless, as she approached her, with a look of searing contempt in her eyes.

"So is that it then?!" Miranda began, in a rage. "He had to save your worthless, pathetic hide for you to believe him?!"

"N-no, I..."

"You brainless, cowardice twit!" She continued, as she suddenly lowered her arm, releasing Cameron from her biotic jail, only to continue to berate, and affront her, face to face. "We nearly DIED because of you!"

"I-I-I... I'm sorry!" Cameron professed, pleadingly, as she put her hands up in front of her, in a defensive fashion, and timidly sank down, with her head tucked between her shoulders. "I'm so sorry! I didn't mean it, I swear! Please...!"

"It's not her fault, Miranda." Gordon's calming voice serenely interjected, as he came to stand behind her. "It was an accident..."

Miranda sighed, and humbly bowed her head. Seeing this, Cameron guardedly started to reemerge into an upright position, as Miranda turned around to face Gordon.

"L...ook..." The blonde haired journalist began again, in a reserved, timid tone, as Miranda wearily leaned against Gordon, while he placed his right arm around her. "It really was an accident..." She continued. "Please, believe me! I swear it won't happen again...!"

"Again?!" Miranda erupted, as she swung back around to glare a hole through the apologetic reporter. "You're not following us, again! You're staying right here!"

"Oh no...!" Cameron implored, as her countenance faded to a look of despondence and dread. "Please...! Please, you can't leave me here!"

"This... probably would be the safest place for you, Miss..." Gordon assured, his words sounding a little shaky, as he tried to keep from writhing under the jolts of pain he was still enduring. "They'd never find you in here. You could wait this whole mess out."

"B-but... But I'll freeze in here!" She exclaimed, the cold-air hanging off her warm breath, as she looked back up at the colossal spinning blades above their heads. The force of the fan was channeled upwards, and they were no longer in the direct path of the torrential winds. But, the nearby cooling coils were still radiating enough cold to bury the mercury in any twentieth-century thermometer.

"Well, here..." Gordon offered, as he began to unbutton the front of his dirty, dust covered tuxedo coat, with his right hand. "I'll leave you my jack-ah-ahh!" He suddenly cringed, as he tried to pull the coat off, despite his best efforts to be careful.

"Gordon..." Miranda said worriedly, reaching out to him, when she suddenly realized she hadn't seen him move his left arm once, since falling through the fan. "Your arm's broken, isn't it? And you've re-opened your wound..."

"No, it's... it's not broken..." Gordon said, speaking under his breath, with a creaky voice, as he clutched at the cast over his forearm. "But you're right, I did tear the wound open again..." He explained, as he cradled his arm, trying to find a more comfortable position to hold it in.

Miranda turned and glared a spiteful hole straight through Cameron, who in return just bowed her head, turned away, and pretended not to notice.

"I'll be alright, though." Gordon reassured, as droplets of his blood dripped from his crimson soaked cuff, like a leaky faucet, dotting the crosshatched metal floor. "Maybe I can find a first-aid station somewhere, once we get outta these vents."

"Here..." Miranda said softly, with a mixture of hesitation, and remorse, as she delicately began to roll back his sleeve. "There should be a medi-gel injector built into your cast."

She pulled the black studded, silver cufflink off of Gordon's shirt, and carefully started rolling it up. The entire cuff was painted in a bold splotch of scarlet, which seemed to permeate the fabric straight up toward his shoulder. As Miranda curled the once spotless white sleeve back, she revealed the large cast enveloping the entirety of Gordon's forearm, from wrist to elbow. It was a gray, metallic cast, accented in chrome, and exhibiting a plethora of small lights and buttons, as it hummed lightly.

With her fingers over his cast, Miranda pressed one of the small, flashing buttons to summon a miniature holographic read-out. With a few clicks of the hologram, the words "Medi-Gel Administered." quickly appeared. Gordon felt a cooling sensation, and a wave of relief wash over him, as the medicinal liniment coated his wound, and immediately went to work.

"Ahh, that's much better. Thank you..." Gordon bestowed, with an alleviated sigh, as he slowly tried outstretching his arm, and forming a fist. He still writhed a bit from the dulling jolts of pain that accompanied each motion, but it was substantially more tolerable, and getting easier with each passing second.

"I know this isn't exactly the most... hospitable situation-" Miranda replied, as she watched him work the movement of his arm a little faster, and a little further each time. "-but I'd try not to do too much with that arm until the medi-gel has had a chance to set."

"Eh, it'll be okay." He said to reassure her, though still taking her advice, and draping his arm idly across his abdomen, as if it were nestled in a sling. "You'd be surprised how many times I've heard 'major... laceration... detected...' from that damn suit." He explained, doing his best to sarcastically mimic his HEV's robotic voice, before sighing and reminiscing. "God I miss that thing..."

While the couple stood together, Cameron slowly stepped up to the both of them. She was hesitant, and intimidated, as she approached, but at the same time grateful, and awestruck.

"My god..." She began, breathless and astonished at the sound of her voice alone bringing a scowl to Miranda's face, and causing her to roll her eyes. "You... You were holding on to the both of us... With a wounded arm... And you never let go...?"

Gordon looked at her, and gave a subtle grin, as he tilted his head, and shrugged his shoulders, nonchalantly. Meanwhile, in an attempt not to lose her composure again, Miranda felt it best simply to stand besides Gordon, averting her eyes from the infuriating reporter.

"L...Listen..." She continued, this time balling her hands up, and placing them over her heart, as she hung her head, remorsefully. "I... I'm so terribly sorry, Mister... Uh, I mean... Doctor... Freeman. Doctor Gordon Freeman... And to you as well...!" She eagerly bestowed, as she turned to look at Miranda's back, which is all that the operative in the red satin dress was giving her. "Miss... Miss Lawson, wasn't it...?"

"..."

"A-anyway..." She awkwardly continued. "I really am sorry...! Please understand, I'm not used to this sort of thing... My assignments are usually fluff pieces, and special interest stories. And I wasn't on Earth or the Citadel when the Reapers came... My god, I can't even IMAGINE doing the things that you've done...! But I think you can imagine why I'd feel safer if I stayed with you... Please don't leave me behind..."

"I still say you'd be safe here..." Gordon conjectured indecisively, as he slowly unfurled the sleeve back over his cast, with his right hand. "But it's fine with me. Though..." He paused for a moment, as he tilted his head towards Miranda. "I'm not the one you have to convince."

"You'd still let her tag along? Even after she nearly got us

killed?!" Miranda snapped frustratedly, as she looked up at him with a mixture of bewilderment, and spite. But also, somewhere deep down in her soft, sky-blue eyes; intrigue, and admiration.

"Hey, it's your call, Miranda." Gordon decidedly assured, in a soft-spoken tone. "I'll leave it up to you. But I know what she's going through..." He explained, as he looked over at the timid, demure reporter, compelling Miranda to do the same. "In the hours after I stepped out of that test chamber, I would've given anything to latch onto someone that could've assured my safety..." He sighed, as his eyes sank. "Instead they latched onto me..."

Miranda stood there for a moment â€" her eyes studying him. How could someone so unbreakable, someone with a fury like an inferno, and a will like steel seem, at times, so tender, and so vulnerable. Miranda reached up, and softly caressed the side of his face, coaxing him to look back up at her. When he did, she smiled warmly, and leaned in to embrace him.

"Okay..." She conceded in a whisper, finding herself completely at peace wrapped in his arms. For several seconds they stood there, holding onto one another, lightly swaying back and forth, in the cold, until eventually she gently pulled away, and turned to face Cameron.

"But if you're coming with us, you're doing EXACTLY what we say!" Miranda stringently asserted, with a rigid finger pointed towards McClane. "No more 'Oh! I don't know about this! Maybe this isn't such a good idea!'" She ordered, performing an exaggerated imitation of what she perceived McClane to sound like.

"Uh... O-of course..." She assured submissively â€" acceding with a joyful nod of her head. "Whatever you say!"

"And from now on, you're the pack mule." Miranda continued to dictate. "If we find any supplies. Anything we need to carry, or take with us, you're the one lugging it about."

"Not a problem!" Cameron assured, clasping her hands together in front of her chest, as the sides of her lips began to curl into a smile. "Be happy to!"

"Oh, and the last thing. STOP with the recordings...! If you really want to report on this, you can do it, from memory, AFTER we've freed the ship... IF we survive...!"

"Well, of course we'll survive...! We've got Gordon Freeman!" Cameron proclaimed, marveling at the physicist, with an almost giddy timbre coming over her voice, before she quickly cleared her throat, and continued with a composed demeanor. "Ahem-Uh... I mean... Yes. Of course. No more reporting! So... I can stick with you two...?"

"Ugh..." Miranda groaned and sighed all at once, as she crossed her arms, and stared up at the colossal fan whirring above their heads. "If you must..."

"Oh, thank you! I really appreciate this...!" She exclaimed, with a huge smile, in an elated show of gratitude, before turning to face Gordon. "And Dr. Freeman, please forgive me for ever doubting you...!"

If we survive this, you simply MUST promise me an exclusive!"

"Uh, yeah... sure..." Gordon heedlessly agreed, while his vision panned around the room, searching for the opening he had spotted from above, and their way out. "How the hell do we get outta here?"

Upon his inquiry, Cameron suddenly remembered spotting an opening. She turned around, and stepped aside, thus revealing the passage in question to the three of them. It was a dark tunnel, a little larger than the one they had emerged from. Perhaps, instead of having to drag themselves through this one on their hands and knees, a simple crouched walk would suffice.

"Ugh..." Miranda griped with a grimace - sounding none too happy to see the revealed opening, as she let her shoulders droop in disappointment. "Did it have to be more ducts...?"

17. Chapter 17: Charmed

****Salvation: Episode I - The Taking of the Carmenta
Illustria****

Disclaimer: This fan-fiction is part of an episodic series taking place after Salvation: A Half-Life/Mass Effect Universe Fan Fiction, which will lead directly to its sequel, Salvation II: Project Prometheus. These episodes and sequel take place OUTSIDE of the Mass Effect 3 continuity. Characters property of their respective companies, Half-Life created by Valve and Mass Effect created by Bioware.

****Chapter 17: Charmed****

The hum of the ship's powerful engines was completely drowned out by the sound. The entire deck was roused up with the muddled murmur of a thousand frightened voices. They were packed in like animals. A whole deck floor completely thronged, and abounding with life. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of passengers, from nearly every race of the known galaxy, sitting helplessly on the floor of what used to be a leisurely, luxury casino. And each of them pleaded the question, if not aloud, then in their own minds. "What are they going to do to us...?"

Like a troop of royal guards defending a palace, the Promenade Deck was surrounded and fortified by a large number of uniformed security personnel. Every exit in sight was protected by no less than three sentries. Around the deck itself, the scenic walkway of polished cherry wood, that offered a breathtaking vista of the streaking stars outside, now served as nothing more than a patrol route for the armed betrayers. A nearby restaurant, situated at the stern end of the deck, which formerly served exotic asari delicacies, had been crammed to capacity with downed and destroyed game tables and machines, which were piled up and spilling out like junkyard refuse. Whatever didn't fit into the restaurant was recklessly packed into corners of the deck, - haphazardly pushed up against the walls. Perhaps the only remnant of the once blithely festive, tribal-themed casino, was the orange flicker of torchlight, still burning bright in the pits of the various braziers lit around the edges of the deck, and at the top of the carved, wooden columns â€" like ritualistic fire.

The pool of life huddled at the center of the deck was securely confined by the guards, like police investigators forming a perimeter around a crime scene. It was truly a conglomerate of the galaxy's wealthiest bon vivants, upper-crusts, and the distinguished aristocrats. But the greatest distinction was deserved by the various members of the Normandy's valiant crew, who now found themselves in the same boat as everyone else, so to speak. They peppered the crowd, packed in shoulder to shoulder, waiting for the situation to either explode or be resolved. The capped helmsman, Joker, sat near the back, slouched down, with his legs crossed indian style, and his droopy, despondent face cradled in the palms of his opened hands. The red haired Yeoman, Kelly Chambers, who was donned in a very provocative, black leather ensemble, likely from a night on the ship's club scene, sat a few rows from the front, with her hand draped over her forehead, shadowing her eyes, as she shook her head in frustration. Further away, and not actually part of the consecutive group, Dr. Karin Chakwas sat on the floor, with her knees bent, and cradled in her arms, as she carried a soft conversation with a middle aged woman, in a dark green cocktail dress. Both women sat besides a slumbering man, resting comfortably on a makeshift bed of pillows, with a metallic device clamped around his arm, feeding a clear liquid solution into his system, and projecting a holographic screen, which displayed a stable set of vital signs.

And in the midst of the jumbled crowd, three of the belligerent guards weaved their way between the disorderly rows of life. They possessed little regard for any extremities they might step on, as they forced their way through, holding up opened black duffel bags, and barbarously demanding anything of value the passengers may be carrying.

"That's all I have, lass. Honest..." One of the passengers seated on the floor declared in a thick Scottish accent, as he stretched out the white fabric of his inside-out pocket linings, to show the bronze skinned brunette officer before him, that he had nothing left to give. "I'm down to me skiddies... Unless you'd want those too. I say I'd be happy to oblige."

"Keep it in your pants, 'stud'..." The gruff, albeit attractive human woman ordered, with an upturned, snide scowl. "Unless you want me to shoot it shot off..."

"Ooch, lass..." The Scotsman said, cringing, and bringing his knees together like a snapping bear trap. "Take me creds, break me heart, but leave me pride intact..."

The woman officer sneered with disgust, as she shook her head, and moved past him, to collect from an asari seated to his left.

"Heh, quite a gemma that one, eh?" He continued in a low tone, as he turned and addressed a woman with short, dark brown hair, seated at his right. "As far as liftits go, at least she's easy to look at."

"For god sakes, Kenneth!" She snapped back at him. "These people are holding us hostage... And you're actually flirting with one of them! What is wrong with you?!"

"Oi, cool your breeks Gabby girl..." The Normandy's Scottish engineer, Kenneth Donnelly, retorted with his hands up in friendly

surrender. "I wasnae gonna ask her to bed. But not much else to do while we're sittin' 'ere on our duffs..."

"There are better ways to pass the time, you know..." Engineer Gabriella Daniels replied with a scowl, as she tucked her legs beneath herself, indian style, and slouched down, resting her grimaced face on the open palm of her right hand. "God, you can be such a pig...!"

"Aww, dunna talk that way, Gabby..." Kenneth appealed, exhibiting a cheerful tenderness, as he leaned over to her. "You know I dunna like it when you're mad at me. Come on, give us a wee smile."

Gabriella was silent for a moment, trying to maintain her sour grimace towards Kenneth. But it wasn't long before his playful, ticklish, elbow jabs to her side started to curl the corners of her lips up. "Hmhm..." She chuckled under her breath, trying to hold it back, before she smirked and rolled her eyes. "Okay, okay, stop...!" She demanded with a titter, as she lightly shoved him back, bringing a pleased grin to his face.

"Ha, that's me girl...!" He declared in a jovial outburst. "And dunna worry your bonnie little head. Shepard'll pull through for us. Always does..."

"Yeah..." Gabby submitted with a sigh. "Well, I guess next to almost getting pureed by the Collectors, this is nothing..." She turned and glanced at Kenneth with a subtle, crooked smile. "I still think you're a pig, though..."

While the Normandy's two ace engineers sat lost somewhere deep in the middle of the kinetic sea of life, conversing and trying to make the best of a bad situation, the Normandy's squad of combat elites sat restrained and subdued, with their hands bound behind their backs by handcuffs, at the very fore of the sizable mass. They too were doing their best to keep their minds occupied, and not provoke a volatile situation. Instead, they chose to bide their time, and maintain faith in the four major game changers they suspected to still be loose on the ship. And while they did this, it was apparent that a few new connections were being made.

"So anyway, yeah... That's how I landed this job." Zdrawkoh Y'kupets, the young turian, formerly of the Carmenta Illustria Security Force explained, as he continued his enthralled conversation with Garrus.

Garrus was slouched down a bit, torquing his neck around, and reclining back onto his hands - trying to keep comfortable, and stave off cramping from the awkward, stagnant position. His teammates made similar attempts at the same. All except for the friendly geth, who was sitting remarkably still, except for a few panels in his head that shifted back and forth, from time to time.

"I figured I'd put in a year or two to help push my application to the C-Sec Academy through a little quicker..." Zdrawkoh, or Zee as he preferred being called by humans, continued. "Never figured my first assignment would be on the damned Tristerion..." He said with a sigh, as he bowed and shook his head.

"Ooh..." Garrus cringed a little at the mention of the familiar name.

"Spirits forbid...! Relax kid. There's no way we're gonna let this turn into the Tristerion."

"Do you remember that...?" The younger turian queried in a lower, more serious tone of voice, as a grimace began to settle on his expression. "I still remember watching it on the news vids, with my dad, when I was maybe five or six..."

Garrus sighed, and hung his head over his chest, as he nodded remorsefully. "...Yeah, I remember."

"Spirits, it was awful..." Zee declared, in mournful retrospection. "All those people killed... Children... Families..."

"I remember, kid!" Garrus snapped, with a mixture of anger and sorrow, as he looked up at his young, uniformed admirer. "I remember..." He placidly continued, exhaling a deep sigh. "I was around your age at the time... And, as a matter of fact, it was one of the reasons I decided to enlist in C-Sec myself. So believe me when I tell you we're NOT about to let this turn into the Tristerion. Whatever happens, if worse comes to worst, we'll do whatever it takes to make sure these people stay safe, alright? Don't worry..."

"Heh..." Zee laughed and cracked a smile. "Easy for you to say. I mean you beat the Reapers with your bare hands. This must be like a stroll through the Presidium for you guys..."

"Well, that's not exactly-"

"Oh shit...!" The younger turian exclaimed in a sudden outburst, cutting Garrus off.

"What...? What is it?" Garrus queried, somewhat sharing the young officer's alarmed timbre.

"I just realized something..." Zee began to explain, with a worried, almost fearful look in his eyes. "I'm pretty sure I'm the only member of security left on this ship that hasn't gone rogue... And I'm technically still on duty. Doâ€| Do you think I should be trying to do something to stop these guys...? I mean that IS my job, right?"

"Eheheheh...!" Garrus chuckled out loud, unable to hold back the laughter, as he bowed and shook his head in amusement, before looking back up and continuing. "No, I'm pretty sure this falls squarely into the 'extenuating circumstances' bracket of your job description. But I like the way you think, kid. You're alright."

A starry-eyed glint shone in the younger turian's eyes, as the edges of his mouth quickly grew into a shy smile. "Eh, well... Y'know..." He muttered, in a modest tone of voice, as he gave a bashful shrug. "I just think; 'What would Garrus Vakarian do...?'"

"...Hey, uhm, by the way..." He continued, as he lowered his voice down to a whisper, and leaned in towards Garrus. Perhaps merely to humor the ward, Garrus turned an ear, and moved in a little closer. "Just between you and me... There's a lot of people that say you used to be the guy they called 'The Archangel of Omega'. That true...?"

Garrus sighed, and rolled his eyes as he leaned back. "Yeah, I've heard that too..." He admitted, with a tinge of irritation in his voice. "I also heard he was dead. Do yourself a favor, kid â€" don't believe everything you hear."

"Oh..." Zee replied with gloomy disillusion, as the look of enchantment was instantly sapped from his expression, causing him to hang his head in disappointment.

Garrus leaned in once more, with a sly grin on his face, as he took a quick glance from left to right, as if to make sure he wasn't being watched. "But just between us..." He whispered. "Some things are okay to believe..."

Zee's head popped up, and turned back towards Garrus, with the wonder-struck gleam in his eyes shining once more. He smiled a bit, as he nodded his head gently. He knew it was far from an any kind of admission, but it was more than enough to keep the fantastical possibility alive in his mind.

While the two cuffed turians carried on with their chat, a bit further on down the line, near the end of the front row, the Normandy's armory officer, and former Cerberus operative Jacob Taylor had sparked up a conversation of his own. And it wasn't the only thing that had sparked.

"Coming on this cruise was, of course, my assistant's idea..." Vanessa Masters; the damp haired brunette enrobed in nothing but a brown towel and Jacob's tan sport coat, explained, as she sat idly besides him, with her crossed arms resting on her towel cocooned knees. "'You're working too hard' she said. 'Take a vacation' she said. 'A nice, relaxing cruise' she said. Pfft..." Vanessa snickered, as she glanced around at the wrecked casino, and at the armed guards on patrol.

"...I expected a bunch of crotchety, old, rich geezers, sipping on cognac, and talking about how much of the galaxy they owned. Never expected this..." She elaborated with a heavy sigh, and a slow, dejected shake of her head, as her eyes panned across the guarded exits. Just then, she turned back towards Jacob, and upon catching his eye with a fetching gaze, a contented smile crept in on her expression. "Still... I also never expected to bump into someone who was quite so charming..." She said in a demure tone, as she gave him a playful nudge. "Not to mention good looking..."

Jacob grinned and lowered his head a bit. His chest bounced from a quick chuckle under his breath, as he repaid her beguiling gaze with a suave smile. "Well, you know I could say the same thing, Ms. Masters..." He coyly remarked, as his eyes traced the outlines of her curves, still visible despite being wrapped in a towel and jacket. "I always thought major business heads were nothing but uptight bigwigs. When'd they start making corporate executives so darn gorgeous...?"

"Hmm..." Vanessa exhaled a satisfied purr. "Keep talking like that, Mr. Taylor, and I might just have to reconsider firing my assistant for booking me on this little vacay..."

"Well... If there's a career on the line, I guess I'll have to see

what I can do." He declared in a soft, smooth tone, as his eyes gleamed with a slick charm. "So tell me... Just what kind of company does a beautiful CEO, with one of the meanest right hooks I've ever seen, run?"

"Oh...!" She happily exclaimed, as her eyes perked up with a sprightly enthusiasm. "Well, my company's called the Super Science Network - or SS-N for short... We're a multi-planetary conglomerate, dealing mostly in pharmaceutical supplies, and medical equipment. But we've really started branching out in the last few months." She further elaborated, in a chipper tone of voice, not unlike that of an experienced saleswoman, as Jacob listened on, genuinely engrossed. "We dabble in everything from genetic engineering, to neo-alloys, to military grade defensive research... You probably haven't heard of us yet. The reason being because, up to six months ago, we were known as the Sirta Foundation."

"The Sirta Foundation?!" Jacob interjected, somewhat taken aback by the revelation. "Wait a minute... So you're telling me you're the head of the company that invented medi-gel...?!"

"Hmph..." Vanessa grinned and tittered under her breath. "Yes, I suppose I am... But Sirta was tanking, unfortunately. I inherited the company from the previous owner, and in less than six-months, turned it into one of the most profitable corporations in the Milky Way."

"That's... more than a little impressive, Ms. Masters... You must be VERY good at what you do."

Vanessa's soft, roseate lips curled into a bewitching smile, as her gleaming lilac eyes narrowed and fixated on his, calling him in with that bittersweet, come-hither look.

"And I suppose this is the part where I say, 'Oh, I'm just looking for that special someone to share it all with...'" She said, sarcastically batting her lengthy lashes, and teasingly feigning an exaggerated naivety, which caused Jacob to wince a little.

"Uh... N-no, I justâ€¦! Well, I meant that... Ngh, you know, you must be..."

"Mmm, you don't seem like the nervous type, Mr. Taylor. And yet I've got you stuttering." She declared with a sense of merriment, after watching Jacob stumble over his words, which only seemed to further entice her interest. "Relax... I wouldn't be where I am now if I didn't have an eye for quality. And so far-" She paused, as she ran her eyes down over his muscular build, behind his black suede shirt, and tan dress pants â€" repaying his earlier glance in full. "-I like what I see... And you're absolutely right. I am very, very good at what I do." She proclaimed - her words slowing, and fading to a soft, seductive whisper.

Jacob could feel actually feel the tiny beads of sweat dotting his brow. He only grinned, and exhaled, as he slouched down, and leaned back a little onto his cuffed hands. He looked on with one raised eyebrow, waiting for her to continue, as he contemplated in silence on how much he was enjoying having this woman push his buttons.

"But anyway, where was I...?" Vanessa queried, as her sirenesque tone

quickly switched back to an all business demeanor. "Oh yes...! My company. We changed our name to the Super Science Network last year when we acquired Binary Helix and Devlon Industries." She continued to explain, as she nonchalantly laid her right hand on Jacob's left thigh. The touch alone was enough to send a pleasant shiver coursing through his body.

"These days, we're doing so much more than medical applications. We've even begun developing an innovative new line of personal, high-tech, self-defense products."

"Is that right?" Jacob asked â€" blithely hanging off every word her melodious voice uttered. "What kind of products?"

"Oh, well just take my necklace for examp..." Vanessa stopped mid-sentence, as she took her right hand, slipped it in through the front opening of Jacob's jacket, and patted her chest and neck in search of something. When she failed to find it, an aghast paleness overtook her expression, as she withdrew her hand, and pulled the jacket lapels forward, to peer down her shadowy, barren chest.

"My necklace..." She uttered in breathless shock â€" her mouth hanging agape, as she looked back up at Jacob with an appalled look in her eyes. "My necklace! I-it's gone! I-I-I must've dropped it when those halfwit goons dragged me outta the shower..." She said, rambling with a distressed stutter. "Oh no, this is terrible!"

"Oh, I'm... I'm so sorry..." Jacob offered up, exhibiting genuine concern, and sympathy, as he watched her fling the damp mass of her silky black hair up, and run her hands over the back of her neck. If his own hands weren't bound by cuffs; being the gentleman that he is, he'd be more than inclined to help her look. "It must be pretty valuable if it's got you so upset..."

"Value has nothing to do with it." She affirmed, as she gave up the search, and shook her head at Jacob. "It's a prototype..."

"A prototype...?"

Vanessa hung her head, and exhaled a disheartened sigh, before she began. "It's the first in the new line of our Sapphire Self-Defense Project... It's supposed to look like an ordinary necklace, with a blue sapphire pendant. But it's designed with a tiny Eezo modulator, hidden behind a focusing lens within the gem."

Jacob's brow furrowed as he listened. He gave a slow, astute nod as it began to make sense.

"From a distance, or to the untrained eye, it's just an ordinary sapphire necklace. But, when activated, it will discharge a small, but powerful, pulse of concussive biotic energy."

"So that's why the asari that brought you in thought you were a biotic...!"

"Yep..." Vanessa acceded with a slow nod of her head, momentarily keeping her eyes shut, and her eyebrows raised. "It was the necklace... It's meant to incapacitate an attacker, giving the victim time to run or call for help." She elaborated with a casual shrug towards Jacob. "I managed to blind one guy with it, and slam another

on his keister... Unfortunately, a small biotic pulse was hardly a match for a brigade of rent-a-cops waving their stupid guns in my face." She said with a scowl. "'Course, they still had to deal with dragging me out kicking and flailing..."

Jacob chuckled softly "an intrigued gleam shone in his eye, as he studied her strong, collected disposition, virtually unaffected by their predicament, aside from some mild frustrations. "Well Miss, that little device of yours sounds ingenious." He earnestly complemented. "Something that small and concealable would make a very handy weapon. Especially now."

Well..." Vanessa hesitated for a moment "a dubious look coming over her, as she tilted her head, and tucked it down between her shoulders. "It's not really intended to kill. Not unless you've got it right up to a person's face, anyway..."

* * *

><p>A crunch came from beneath the turian officer's boot, as he took one final glance over a deluxe stateroom, which had been completely purged of all it's valuables.<p>

"Hello..." He said with delight, as he lifted his heel to find a lustrous blue bauble strewn across the threshold that separated the carpeted bedroom from the wet bathroom floor. He quickly bent down, and scooped the necklace up by it's glistening silver chain.

"Well..." He began, talking to himself, as he dangled the dazzling blue sapphire pendant in front of his face, for a closer examination. "This looks like it could be worth a cred or two. Hmm..." He muttered curiously, upon spotting a tiny black button, no larger than a pinhead, on the charm's side. "...What's this?"

A brilliant flash of blue light spilled into the hallway of the luxury stateroom deck, like the lightning strike outside a window, advertising a downpour. And then, not a split second later, like a sack of potatoes being dropped on the floor "a thud.

* * *

><p>"I only brought it along because I wanted to see if I could pass it off as an actual sapphire necklace, among the privileged." Vanessa continued, with a quick turn to look at the sea of life behind her, before turning back and giving a quick roll of her eyes. "I wasn't planning on actually putting it to use... If nothing else, I guess I can call it a successful field test."<p>

Jacob released a rueful sigh and shook his head before beginning. "I'll tell you what Ms. Masters." He said with a forthright look in his eyes, as he turned to face her. "I'm not exactly keen on letting these bastards get away with everyone's cash and valuables. I'm sure none us are..." He expressed, as he turned to his right for a brief glance at his teammates, who each sat engaged in trivial conversations of their own. "Now there isn't much we can do right now, while they've got hostages. But I can all but promise you that before this trip is over, somehow, someway, I'll get your necklace back to you..."

A modest smile grew on Vanessa's face, and an intrigued look beamed in her eyes. "Well..." She began, in a soft, curious tone of voice. "Aren't you Mr. tall, dark, and dangerous? You talk like someone who's no stranger to this sort of thing. So tell me, Mr. Taylor..." She implored, sliding herself closer to him - their two shoulders now pressed softly together, creating heat. "Just who are you? And why does that name of yours sound oh so familiar...?"

"Hmph." Jacob let out a spirited chuckle under his breath. "Well... I'm sure you've heard it mentioned in the news vids."

While the two continued to converse, and fall under each other's spell at one end of the forefront row of the captive crowd, a burly krogan sat glowering in ill-humored silence, at the other end. His hands were locked behind his prominent, mound-like back with two sets of handcuffs, and he sat glaring into space with an irate look in his eyes.

"You're being awfully quietâ€¦" A familiar voice suddenly grated in his ear.

Without pivoting his head even slightly, Grunt's reptilian blue eyes glanced to the left to see Mordin staring back at him intently, with an intrigued countenance on his face, as if he'd just discovered a fascinating new phenomenon. Caring very little for what the salarian had to say, Grunt shifted his eyes back to the front, and continued to sulk in silence.

"Surprising..."

Grunt huffed and finally broke his silence, with an annoyed roll of his eyes. "Why is it surprisingâ€¦?"

"Wellâ€¦ Krogan rebellious by nature." Mordin informed, with a casual shrug of his shoulders. "Would've expected more aggression, that's all. Find your degree of self-control fascinating."

"You and the others are the ones that stopped me. What more do you want?" Grunt demanded, raising his deep voice with a touch of resentment, as he finally turned his head to look directly at Mordin. "Besidesâ€¦ I was taught by the tank-mother that to a krogan, one's battlemaster is a fearsome and powerful thing - to be honored and respected." He continued - his voice evening out to a placid, somber tone, as he faced forward once more. "Shepard has more than earned his authority, and my obedience. And what Garrus said is trueâ€¦ Above all else, Shepard would not want the lives of the fodder put at risk. So I will wait for his ordersâ€¦ Or at least, the confirmation of his death."

"Hmmâ€¦ Charmingâ€¦"

18. Chapter 18: The Man in the Vents

****Salvation: Episode I - The Taking of the Carmenta Illustria****

Disclaimer: This fan-fiction is part of an episodic series taking place after Salvation: A Half-Life/Mass Effect Universe Fan Fiction, which will lead directly to its sequel, Salvation II: Project

Prometheus. These episodes and sequel take place OUTSIDE of the Mass Effect 3 continuity. Characters property of their respective companies, Half-Life created by Valve and Mass Effect created by Bioware.

****Chapter 18: The Man in the Vents****

"Shepard's been here and left." Davix declared from a flickering holographic screen on the bridge, while Kargas, Kim, and Tarrik intently looked on. "We found the wreckage of the LOKI he wasted, but he's long gone."

The blood-pack armored turian stood on the screen, holding his impressive assault rifle in an idle position across his chest, pointed down towards the floor. Behind him, uniformed security agents walked on and off screen, as they performed double and triple checks of each of the empty state-rooms. Meanwhile, Teshya, his asari partner, oversaw the operation - mandating orders where she deemed necessary.

"It looks like he was gonna try and override one of the door locks." Davix proceeded with his report. "We found the wallpaper stripped off of one of the door's maintenance panels. He must've heard us coming before he could finish and decided to try and find another way."

"So then where is Shepard now?" Tarrik queried, with a hiss of his breath.

"Well, we found an opened access hatch in the floor of one of the janitor's closets. My guess is he escaped down into the ventilation system. So he'll probably be somewhere on the lower decks. Me and Tesh are gonna head down and see if we can't pick up a trail somewhere."

"Did you find anything else that might indicate where he's going, or if he's got other members of his crew with him?" Kargas' rumbly krogan voice questioned.

"Well..." The turian on-screen muttered dubiously, as he turned around to face the wall behind him. As he stepped aside, two of the Illustria's security personnel, a human and a turian, were shown sitting on the carpeted floor, with their backs to the wall. The turian officer clutched half his face with his palm, as if attempting to quell a torturous headache. Meanwhile, the human simply seemed to slump over, flaccidly.

"That's Rykus and Cooke." Commander Kim quickly declared, upon recognizing two of his own men.

"We did find these two unconscious in one of the room closets." Davix's voice narrated, from his place off-camera. "They've both been stripped of their weapons. One of 'em's starting to come around, but the human's still out cold. Trouble is, the one that's waking up says he doesn't remember anything. The last thing he remembers is looting a few of the safes, then finding his partner laid out, and thenâ€¦ nothing."

Davix stepped back into the center of the screen as he finished his report, blocking out the two injured guards behind him, and awaiting further questions or orders.

"Hmmâ€|" Kargas muttered pensively, with a throaty growl, as he appraised the new developments. "Very well, Davix. You and Teshya continue your search. Keep me updated on anything you find."

"Yes sir." The Blood-Pack turian affirmed with a stern, disciplined nod.

"One other thingâ€|" Tarrik's nasally voice interjected, as he stepped forth with a regal stance, and an undeserved Captain's cap sitting on his brow. "I'd advise you to keep your eyes open for another human that may be on the loose... This one has a small patch of human facial fur surrounding his mouth, and he'll be wearing some sort of targeting device on his eyes." As soon as the ridiculous description came out of the volus' mouth, Kim rolled his eyes and grumbled something profane under his breath.

"He's to be considered just as dangerous as Shepard, so be alert." Tarrik finished, with a hiss from his respirator.

"Uhâ€| Sure... We'll keep our eyes open. Davix out." As the turian mercenary awkwardly accepted the added task, and finished his report, he summoned his omni-tool and terminated the transmission from his end. The screen on the bridge crackled with static, and erupted into a snowy visage, before simply dissipating all together.

"Well, Commander Kimâ€|" The self-righteous little volus addressed, as he turned and looked up at the burly, human Security Commander who towered over him. "It would appear that Shepard's armed himselfâ€| My confidence in your ability to suppress this situation is deteriorating by the minute!"

Tarrik's sanctimoniously shrill voice grated on the one-eyed Commander's last nerve, like the piercing wail of a banshee. The sides of his jaw jutted in and out with anger, as he ground his teeth and contemplated the horrible things he could do to the impish creature. One hand is all it would take, really. He could wrap it around the little parasite's throat, and squeeze until he'd stop squirming. Until that annoying little respirator of his stopped its damnable hissing. But right now, there were other matters to deal with, and as much as Kim hated admitting it to himself, the volus was right. The situation was starting to escalate beyond his control...

Ignoring Tarrik's criticisms, for now, Kim crossed his arms began to speak. "I've heard a lot of things about Shepard in the news vids." He said. "But I've never heard them say anything about him being some sort of expert hackerâ€| He's gotta have somebody with him. And whoever it is was able to hack into our surveillance network and fool us by switching the feedsâ€|"

"Yes, well Leahr assures me that he's already corrected that little problemâ€|" Tarrik casually acknowledged. "But perhaps, it was that Freeman Earth Clan that did itâ€|" He proposed, inciting a cold, irritated glare from the Commander. "...I merely make the suggestion, because based on his outward appearance, he looks like the type of person who might know his way around that sort of thing." The volus offered up with a shrug.

"It doesn't matter." Kargas assertively rang in. "There's not much

they can do with those toy guns they stole from Kim's men. Davix and Teshya can still handle this."

"...And if they fail?" Came the question from the skeptic volus.

Kargas looked down. "'If they failâ€|?'" He disdainfully reiterated. His pupils seemed to contract, leaving only a thin, black stripe that reflected eons of primal, predatory, reptilian instinct. "IF they fail Tarrik, then I'll hunt Shepard down personally. You don't have to worry about that. I'll tear this ship apart if I have to! But they won't fail meâ€|" He asserted, as he looked back up towards the human Commander. "I'm sure of it."

"Well, I certainly hope your confidence in them is better placed than was mine in Commander Kim." Tarrik scoffed, with a dismissive wave of his hand, as he turned away and began to waddle towards the front of the bridge. "For all our sakesâ€|"

Kim's nostrils flared, and his brow tightened with a vicious sneer for the volus, as he watched him approach the quarian seated at foremost station of the bridge.

"Just so you knowâ€|" Kim said under his breath, addressing the krogan. "I'm going to kill him when this is overâ€| The quarian too, I think. But Tarrik's the only one I'm really gonna have fun with."

"Hmphâ€|" Kargas chortled, as he studied the surveillance feeds that had since appeared on the screen before them. "Be my guest. Saves me the trouble."

"Soâ€|" Kim continued with a sigh, as he joined Kargas in observing the screen. "I haven't really known the three of you all that longâ€| What makes you so sure that Davix and Tesh can handle this? I mean this is Shepard we're talking aboutâ€|"

"I'm glad to see you finally appreciate the magnitude of the situation." The krogan uttered, with a brief glance in Kim's direction. "But the more I think about it, the more I realize you were right... Shepard is out of his element here. And without the luxury of his weapons, his armor, or his crew, he's at a great disadvantage. As long as we don't let our guard down, we'll stop him."

"And to answer your question-" He calmly began to explain, while keeping his attention on the surveillance monitors. "-Davix, for one, is ex turian military... Attained the highest marks. Specialized in closed quarters and hand-to-hand combat tactics. Court martialed for use of excessive force when he killed two of his fellow soldiers and a superior officer during a training exercise. Broke out and escaped to the Terminus before they could sentence him."

"Woahâ€| I didn't know Davix was ex-militaryâ€| What about Teshya? Former asari commando?"

"No, but I'm sure she's killed her share." Kargas casually continued. "Teshya's a former Eclipse Sister who was double-crossed. During a job hitting a wealthy merchant colony, three of her sisters decided to turn on her. They figured it'd be sweeter splitting the take three

ways rather than four. A few days later, their leader received all three of their head fringes in the mail as her resignation."

Kim's eyes opened wide with alarm. "She scalped them?!"

"While they were still alive, by her account." Kargas elaborated. "She informed her leader that she'd do the same to anyone in Eclipse who came after her. And then she'd come after himâ€¦"

"Whewâ€¦" Kim released a deep winded sigh, almost a whistle, as he shook his head in amazement. "Now that's a womanâ€¦"

The fog-eyed Commander stood there quietly for a moment, just taking it all in. He'd had something of a thing for Teshya since the first time the five of them came together to discuss the details of their little scheme. Something about that aura of danger that she radiated just seemed to drive him crazy. But as he realized how little he actually knew about her and his other associates, it suddenly dawned on him that he knew even less about their krogan employer.

"...And what about you, Karg?" The human hesitantly put forth. "What happened? What's this vendetta you've got with Shepard?"

Kargas' eyes narrowed, as his memories flooded back in vivid detail, bringing with them a deluge of rage. His brow tightened with anger, and his neck reverberated from a loud, throaty growl, like the groan from an irate crocodile. Sensing himself on the brink of eruption, he closed his eyes, and exhaled a deep breath - keeping his volatile temper in check, before he began.

"My vendetta with Shepard is a result of his flagrant campaign to eradicate my entire species..." The Blood-Pack armored krogan explained, as he slowly pried his eyes open again. "It was about eight months ago that I left Tuchanka and took work as a hired gun. My clan had great ambitions for the krogan race, and I was willing to do anything to help fund them. About two months later, I received a chilling message from one of my clan's females. When I returned home, I was shocked to find that everything was goneâ€¦ All that we had built and worked for, ruinedâ€¦ My clan had been destroyed. Our research was gone. And every one of my brood brothers, deadâ€¦"

"...Wh-what was your clan researching?"

Kargas turned towards Commander Kim - the sternness of his eyes had softened, somewhat. "A cure for the genophageâ€¦"

"There was a salarian with us." He continued. "Maelon... He believed in our cause. So many of our women gladly volunteered themselves for his tests - valiantly sacrificing their own lives so that we could, at long last, find a cure. And he was close. Very close. But it was all in vain... There was nothing left of Clan Weyrloc. The Urdrnots picked at our carcass by taking in the surviving women and children, using them to strengthen their own numbers. Even the salarian was gone - likely dispatched by Shepard's own handâ€¦"

"Two years before that, the spectre Saren Arterius had engineered his own cure for the genophage. I don't care what arrangements he had with the geth OR the Reapersâ€¦ The only thing that matters to me is that there was a cure, and Shepard destroyed it without a second

thoughtâ€| "

"My brood may be gone, but I kept my nameâ€|" He asserted, with a look of immovable resolve in his eyes, and a righteous pride swelling in his chest. "I am Weyrloc Kargas. And my clan will realize its glory. I will find a cure for the genophage, whatever it takes. And give it only to those krogan whom _I_ deem worthy. TRUE krogan. Not like the weak, pathetic stock of the Urdnot Clan... But first thing is firstâ€| There is a walking, breathing, living insult to my very existence on this ship. When they bring him to me, I will kill the human Shepard. I will crush him... Grind him... I will tear the flesh from his bones with my teeth, and bathe in his blood... And then, when there is nothing left but the carrion decay of his bones, I will wrap them in chains, and use them to festoon my armor as I lead the new krogan uprising to claim a galaxy that rightfully belongs to usâ€| "

"Alright, big fella. I believe youâ€|" Kim assured with a wary tone, and a nervous laugh, as he put his hands up in a halting fashion, and took a single, step back from the deranged, fantasizing krogan. "You just uhâ€| remember us when you get to the top, eh?" He said with an uneasy chuckle.

Kargas didn't placate the human any further. He turned back to the screen and pretended to channel all his attention onto the surveillance feeds. But his thoughts chattered away in his head, plaguing him incessantly.

"...Right thenâ€|" Kim hesitantly uttered, upon noticing the newly placid, benign condition of the krogan. "Anywayâ€| There's one thing that's bothering meâ€|" He said, slowly shaking his head, as he cautiously rejoined Kargas in watching the screen. "Shepardâ€| He doesn't seem like the kinda guy who'd go crawling around in the vents..."

* * *

><p>The aluminum grate flew off of the ventilation shaft cavity, revealing the large foot that had kicked it out, belonging to the physicist in the shadowy hole. The opening was situated near the ceiling, just above an inert metallic door, in a dimly lit section of the ship. Gordon pulled himself to the edge of the shaft, and carefully slid out, feet first, as if he was coming out of a water slide. A clang came as his hard soled dress shoes made contact with the steel mesh floor. Gordon took a couple of steps forward and looked down through the mesh. He could see that they were on some sort of steel catwalk that was suspended a considerable height above the deck floor.<p>

"Where are weâ€|?" He asked rhetorically - scanning the area, while on his guard, as Miranda slid out and planted her feet on the floor behind him.

"Looks like one of the ship's maintenance areasâ€|" Miranda suggested, after having taken a quick look around for herself.

.

Behind her, Cameron slowly approached the opening, while Miranda joined Gordon. Determined not to be any more of a burden, she awkwardly shifted and turned herself around in the vent, moving out

towards the edge in a slow, backwards crawl, and letting her legs dangle, before hanging herself down and clumsily dropping - nearly losing her balance when she touched ground.

Once she regained her composure, she stood up straight, and began to brush herself off - patting smokey puffs of dust out of the fabric. She was still shivering a bit from the cold, despite now wearing the black tuxedo jacket that formerly belonged to Gordon. Both the jacket, and the skirt bottom of her once spotless, sky blue dress were splotted with stains of white and gray dust. Not to mention her blonde hair, which might as well have been a feather duster.

Gordon and Miranda both suffered the same dust-covered affliction, but it was of little importance to them. Miranda's perfumed, silky black hair was plagued with the stuff, and her once lovely, red, evening gown looked like a crimson sky, speckled by patches of fluffy storm clouds.

With his black jacket on loan to the ambitious, albeit somewhat blunderous reporter, Gordon was down to his white dress shirt. The silvery cast encasing his left forearm was no longer concealed, as both his sleeves were now rolled up past his elbows. The entire left sleeve was marked with the prominent, dark red stain of his blood, all the way up to his underarm. And his previously neat, combed back hair was now back to it's fairly usual haphazard state of unconformity.

Gordon's targeting visor illuminated the area for him, as the three continued to look around. A set of handrails secured the catwalk on either side. It spanned about thirty feet, leading from one inactive metal door straight to another. There was a small toolbox, and a few scattered tools, along with a datapad, on the floor, near the edge.

There weren't any noticeable light fixtures. The only real light in the area was coming from two huge, animated, outward facing, holographic marquees on either side of the catwalk, which spelled out "Galleria Deck" in colorful, dancing letters, surrounded by abstract, aesthetic designs. The letters were mirrored backwards from their point of view, sandwiched in between - but they weren't difficult to read. And the marquees worked well in concealing their presence from the malignant forces below.

Gordon, Miranda, and Cameron all approached the right hand railing, gripped it, and looked straight down. About forty feet below them was a plethora of small shops and outlets, laid out across the deck like the stores in a shopping mall. Each shop was separated by walls, but none of them was sheltered by a ceiling, granting the three onlookers the perfect vantage point to watch the uniformed goons pillage the stores. Shop kiosks were broken apart and relieved of their treasure troves of credit chits. The glass displays of a high-end jewelry boutique were smashed in, allowing the thieves to take freely, and fill their black duffle bags without fear of consequence. And out in the open, a pair of patrolling mechs marched down the central corridor - each wielding a fully loaded sub-machine in its grip.

"Look at them all!" Cameron uttered, with a mixture of awe and disgust, in a hushed tone. "They're nothing but a bunch of petty thieves!"

"Petty thieves and slave traders..." Gordon asserted with an angry, disdainful sneer, as his bare knuckles whitened from the increasingly tight grip he held on the rail.

Cameron looked over at him. "Butâ€¦ You'll stop them, won't youâ€¦?" She beckoned, with a reverent spark of hope in her eyes, and a timbre of child-like innocence in her voice. "I meanâ€¦ You ARE Gordon Freeman, rightâ€¦?"

Gordon snickered under his breath, as he bowed and shook his head. "Miss, what is it you think I'm going to do?" He asked, with a tinge of mild sarcasm, and a small, crooked smirk on his face. "Jump down there and demand their unconditional surrender on the premise that I AM Gordon Freeman?"

"Well, it could work..." Miranda added with a titter, as she looked over at him. "...If they believe you."

"Never worked on the Combineâ€¦" He said with a sigh, as he pushed himself away from the rails, and turned to Cameron. "We'll do everything we can, okay?"

Feeling slightly reassured, Cameron nodded with a small, timid grin. "Of courseâ€¦" She conceded. "Soâ€¦ where do we go now?"

"Uhmâ€¦" Gordon spun around and looked back and forth at both inert doors on opposite ends of the catwalk. Choosing the one that didn't have the opened vent shaft above it, he strolled over to it and examined it. When he reached the door, he wasn't quite sure what to do next. Every door he'd encountered since waking up here in the 22nd century was outfitted with a holographic panel, which was used to open it. But this one was barren. In his haste, he just ran his hand up and down along the flat surface, where 20th century doors usually featured a nob.

"Uhâ€¦" He mumbled, as Miranda came up behind him. "How do we get outta hereâ€¦?"

"I don't think we can..." Miranda suggested, coaxing Gordon to turn and give her his full attention. "It looks like they've completely disabled the door panels."

"Can youâ€¦ I dunno, hack it, or somethingâ€¦?"

"Hmâ€¦" Miranda uttered pensively, as she took a step closer to the door, and studied it from top to bottom, tapping a curled finger on her bottom lip. "No, we'd need a tech expert..." She submitted, with a regretful shake of her head. "If the panel was still active but locked, I could probably override it. But I can't open this..."

"Maybe we could pry it openâ€¦" Gordon dubiously suggested, as he turned back and ran the tips of his fingers along the tightly sealed edge of the door.

"I doubt itâ€¦ That's solid steel, and it could have an alarm attached to it. We'd be letting the whole ship know where we are..."

Gordon sighed, and slouched his shoulders, as he rested his forehead against the door, in defeat.

"...So, does that mean-?"

"Yep." Miranda affirmed, cutting the reporter off before she could even finish her question.

"Back into the vents...?" Cameron said questioningly, finishing it anyway, with a dismal groan and sigh.

"Fun, right?" Miranda declared with a sarcastic enthusiasm, as she turned to face their accompanying journalist. Upon doing so, she furrowed her brow in confusion - finding Cameron holding her illuminated omni-tool up in front of her. Projected above it was a small screen, displaying everything she was seeing, like the viewfinder on a camera.

"W-what are you doing?" Miranda interrogated, upon seeing herself reflected on McClane's screen.

"Filming." The reporter answered, with a nonchalant shrug, as she continued to capture video.

"I thought I told you-!"

"You said no more reporting!" Cameron immediately interjected, cutting Miranda off before she could grow any more irate. "You never said ANYTHING about not filming!"

Miranda sighed, and groaned all at once, as she closed her eyes, and began rubbing her temples in frustration. "Just Fine Whatever, I don't even bloody Whatever!" She grumbled, and mumbled, as she waved her hands dismissively in front of her. .

Just then, oblivious to the aggravation behind him, Gordon remembered the tool box he had spotted on the mesh floor of the catwalk.

"Hmm..." He hummed pensively, as he quickly turned away from the door, and marched over towards it, breezing past the two women.

"If nothing else, maybe we can find something to arm ourselves with!" He announced resolutely, as he crouched down before the tool box, and took a quick inventory of the scattered instruments around it. There was a small, blue handled brush with stiff, grime covered, metallic bristles, a set of large pliers, with soft, yellow foam grips, and what appeared to be a short socket wrench of some sort. Nothing particularly useful for his intentions. There was also a small, inactivate datapad, with a blank, silvery screen, and a polished red and black finish around the edge. Ignoring the scattered utensils, he shifted his focus to the black toolbox, unhinged the lock, and split it open.

"What are you looking for?" Miranda queried, as she stood behind him, looking on.

"Anything sharp or blunt that would make an effective weapon." He explained, as he sifted through the accoutrements - all the while being filmed by the diligent, go-getting journalist.

"Hmph." Miranda giggled a little, under her breath. "I'm surprised

you didn't bring your crowbar along with you. You two seem inseparable."

Gordon pulled out some sort of small, but sturdy looking, electric screw-driver. At the push of a button, its head would change to accommodate phillips, flatheads, and various other types of screws, rivets, and fasteners. It was also equipped with a tiny saw, and a miniature sanding pad.

"I had to leave it behind on Xen." He answered inattentively, as he examined the device in his hand, and practiced a few forceful thrusts with it, as if it were a knife. The feel of it all was very awkward, and not at all like him, so he quickly dropped it back into the toolbox. He looked up at Miranda. "For all I know, it probably melted in the Element Chamber, when I set off the Eezo core!" He stated disappointedly.

Cameron's eyes grew wide with enthusiasm, as did her smile, as she looked up over her omni-tool's viewfinder screen. "You actually use a crowbar?!" She beckoned, with a gleeful exuberance. "I-I I always thought that was just a historical exaggeration... That's amazing!"

"Sure could use it right about now." Gordon muttered, as he clanged instruments around in the toolbox.

"So what else is true about you?!" She over-excitedly implored, as she looked back down at his visage, through her screen, making sure he was in perfect focus. "Is it true that you once trained an entire herd of antlions to be your own personal bodyguards?!"

"Uhm... I!"

"What about the claim that you never spoke ONCE throughout your entire war with the Combine?!"

"Well I I was never really one for-"

"Is it true that your eyeglasses contained magical properties?"

"What?!"

"Ahem!" The sudden sound of Miranda forcibly, and aggressively clearing her throat coerced a nervous glance from Cameron, and instantly brought a halt to the perpetual barrage of questions.

"Uh Oh, right!" Cameron timidly acknowledged, as she looked over at the cross-armed, scowling brunette. "No reporting!" She assured, as she looked back towards Gordon. "I-I withdraw my questions!"

Gordon looked up at McClane with a stunned, wide-eyed countenance, before giving a dumbfounded grin, and shaking his head, as he went back to his search. Just then, the tips of his fingers brushed against something blunt, solid, and heavy. He wrapped his hand around it, preparing to pull it out, when he heard Miranda speak up again.

"Gordon, what is that?" She queried, pointing down over his shoulder, at the datapad on the floor.

"What is what?" He asked in response, as he pulled the blunt instrument out, and looked over the tool box lid, in the direction her finger was aimed.

"The datapad there. Is there anything on that?"

"Hmm" He wondered aloud, as he reached over the tool box to pick it up. When he grabbed it, his thumb inadvertently tapped the screen, causing it to light up and exhibit a short message.

_Hal, the sign was shorting out __AGAIN__. I've installed new TCR connectors, but that's only a temporary fix until we can get replacement power couplings. I keep telling mngmt, the ship's getting old. She's still pretty, but she's got a lot of aches and pains. Maybe if they hear it from you, they'll actually listen. _

_ - Dave _

Gordon read the message aloud, but couldn't really perceive anything meaningful about it. "Just looks like some sort of work memo." He said.

"Wait, let me see that." Miranda urged, just as Gordon was about to put the datapad aside.

"Sure, why?" He queried, as he stood up and handed her the device.

"If it belongs to the maintenance department-" The operative in the red dress began to explain, as her fingers worked the screen. "-then there might be some useful information on here."

"Like what?"

After a few well placed taps on the screen, a sudden gleam shone in Miranda's eyes, as if she were a prospector that had just struck gold. "Oh, like a complete schematic layout of the entire ship, including the ventilation system." She happily declared, as she held the datapad out in front of her.

"Really?!" Gordon exclaimed in disbelief, as both he and the filming reporter came to stand beside Miranda to observe her findings. True to her description, the screen displayed a perfectly labeled, color coded, cross-sectional, three-dimensional diagram of the grand ship Carmenta Illustria, in all it's entirety. Including the ventilation shaft network.

"Oh fantastic, we have a map now!" Cameron eagerly submitted, temporarily diverting her attention away from her camera-mode omni-tool. "At least we won't be crawling around in there blind anymore, right?"

Gordon nodded while his focus remained on the diagram. "Is there any way you can figure out the quickest path down to the engine room?"

"Of course." Miranda confidently acknowledged, without the slightest

hint of uncertainty, as she continued to tap away at the screen.

The view of the ship rotated and zoomed into the aluminum labyrinth of tunnels. Everything else seemed to fade into the background leaving only the expansive ventilation array distinctly visible. Just then, a brightly colored dotted line began plotting their course out through the maze.

"Looks like there's an access ladder on the East end of this deck." Miranda dictated, as she traced the path along with her finger. "We can climb down to the Mezzanine Deck, and then follow this shaft across the ship's main galley. That should put us squarely above the ship's engine room, here." She announced, as she pinpointed the location on the pad, with the tip of her index finger.

Impressed, Gordon looked up from the datapad and fawned at the dust covered, porcelain skinned, siren beside him. "Heh, lady you're beautiful..."

"Oh, I know." Miranda acknowledged, pretending to take on a pretentious tone, as she kept her head bowed. But after a moment, she raised her eyes to look at him, with an affectionate warmth glinting in her eyes. "You're not so bad yourself, tough guy..." She conveyed with a playful, modest smile.

Feeling a bit like the awkward third wheel among the two enamoured combatants, Cameron casually turned away and leaned over the rail to film the subterfuge taking place below - pretending to suddenly be enthralled by their fiendish acts.

"Well... Let me just download this to my omni-tool, and we can go." Miranda continued, returning to a natural tone of voice, as she summoned her arm-mounted, holographic computer and scanned it over the datapad.

After a few seconds of syncing the datapad information with her omni-tool, the flashing words "Transfer In Progress" on the device were replaced by the static words "Transfer Complete".

"There." She announced, as her omni-tool suddenly exhibited the same schematic diagram from before. "All set... Ready to go?" She asked, looking up at Gordon, as she lowered her arm and dismissed her omni-tool.

"Yeah, but uh-" Gordon mumbled a bit, as he pointed a finger around his shoulder, and slowly turned, drawing attention to the toolbox. "-There's some tools and screwdrivers in that toolchest if you wanna arm yourself with something."

"Hmmâ€¦|" Miranda clenched her lips, with a dubious look on her face, as she shook her head in polite refusal. "No, even without my amps, I think I'd be more effective just sticking to my biotics. Were _you_ able to find something, though?"

"Oh yeahâ€¦|!" He blurted out, as he suddenly remembered he was holding onto a blunt instrument.

He raised his right hand, and showed off a jaded, old, red Stillson Pipe Wrench. It was solid and heavy. And there was about a one inch gap in the jaw of the instrument, showing off the metal ridges, like

rows of jagged teeth, waiting to be fed.

"Well that looks like it could do some damage." Miranda assured, as she observed the soon to be weaponized tool in the physicists adept hands.

"Best I could findâ€|" Gordon stated indifferently, as he shrugged his shoulders, and lowered his arm. "Not exactly my weapon of choice... I mean, who uses a monkey wrench? Honestlyâ€|"

19. Chapter 19: Technical Difficulties

****Salvation: Episode I - The Taking of the Carmenta
Illustria****

Disclaimer: This fan-fiction is part of an episodic series taking place after Salvation: A Half-Life/Mass Effect Universe Fan Fiction, which will lead directly to its sequel, Salvation II: Project Prometheus. These episodes and sequel take place OUTSIDE of the Mass Effect 3 continuity. Characters property of their respective companies, Half-Life created by Valve and Mass Effect created by Bioware.

****Chapter 19: Technical Difficulties****

The air in this cramped place was thick, and laced with the pungent odor of machine grease. There were utility lamps mounted on each level, extending high into the shadow-cloaked ceiling like a row of lights on an airport runway. But the area was so smothered in darkness, that their meager orange glow only seemed to get swallowed up, like water to a sponge. Rhythmic taps echoed off the confined metallic walls, as two sets of hard soled shoes made contact with each individual rung of a metal ladder bolted to the inside of the elevator shaft.

"How you doing, buddy? You okay?" Commander Shepard asked the little boy being carried on his left arm.

"Yeah, I'm okay." Little Matty assured with a nod, as he sat perched on Shepard's forearm, with his small arms wrapped around the Commander's broad neck. "I'm not scaredâ€|"

Due to his still injured leg, and the use of only one arm, Shepard had to take the ladder one slow step at a time. Tali followed along, at his set pace, above him. She too was using only one arm, but that's only because she was keeping her newly acquired pistol at the ready, in her right hand. So far, the elevators were still deactivated, and there was no sign of anyone trying to intercept their descent. But they kept their eyes sharp, and their ears keen.

"Not scared, eh?" The semi-formally dressed Commander replied with a grin, as he continued his decline. "Well, you're a very brave little man, Matthew. You ever been told that before?"

Matthew smiled bashfully, as his cheeks turned a rosy hue.

"Noâ€|"

"Noâ€|?! " Shepard beckoned, feigning great surprise - all for the

sake of keeping the child's mind at ease. "I find that _very _hard to believe!"

"Wellâ€|" Tali chimed in from above, utilizing the same carefree timbre. "When we find his mom and dad, we'll just have to tell them how brave he is, won't we?"

The boy's expression beamed as he clung to Shepard's shoulders. In his mind, the harrowing ordeal was all but over. He had been rescued by the good guys, and it was only a matter of time now before he was reunited with his parents. The Commander, on the other hand, realized only too well the great encumbrance they had taken on with this young boy. His priority now must be, above all else, to keep the child safe. But no matter what it would take, he knew he would do just that. As would his beloved quarian.

As the three of them continued travelling down the abysmal shaft, Shepard was suddenly surprised to feel solid ground beneath his feet, as he moved to situate his foot on the next rung of the ladder. He looked down as he stepped off, finding that they had finally reached the steel floor of the elevator shaft bottom.

"Finallyâ€|" He expressed with a sigh of relief, as stepped off of the ladder, and turned to set Matty down. "Stay put, okay? Don't get too close to those cables." He instructed, referring to the set of thick, greased, high tension cables protruding out of the floor, and attached to a large, motorized pulley array.

By the time Tali reached the bottom, and stepped off of the ladder, Shepard had already made his way to the adjacent sealed elevator door. Using a tactful touch, he slowly began to pry the doors apart with his fingertips, revealing only a hairline slit of light. He then pressed his cheek against the doors, and peered out through the gap.

"Hmmâ€|" He uttered suspiciously, as he studied the area outside. "It looks clear from here. No visible hostiles..."

"Well, I'm still tapped into the ship's surveillance network." Tali proclaimed, as she came to stand beside Matty, and raised her omni-tool. "Let's look to make sure."

His curiosity enticed, the black haired little boy stared up at Tali - watching her manipulate the holographic computer encompassing her forearm. A screen was summoned, displaying various surveillance feeds from across the ship, which she quickly began cycling through in search of one in particular.

"This should be the ship's loading bay." She thought out loud, as she sifted through the screens with her fingertips, before stopping on the one she sought. "Ah, here we go."

Tali held her arm further out in front of her, showcasing the holographic screen of the loading bay's active surveillance feed. It was a rather spacious deck, but much of the space was occupied by rows of odd recreational conveyances.

They were bulky, round shaped vehicles, a little bigger than a kodiak shuttle - likely, the submersible "aqua-pods" the Lycuna brochures advertised. These could serve as boats, and skim along on the surface

of tranquil waters for a leisurely outing. Or for the more adventurous excursionist, they could also be sealed up, and dive deep beneath the waves to explore an otherworldly realm of ambrosial undersea oddities.

Besides the aqua-pods, there was also a wealth of other recreational amenities; water toys, small boats, diving equipment, jet skis, surf and body boards, and so on. But most of it went unnoticed, as John and Tali studied the holographic screen intently.

"I'm not seeing anyone." Tali declared, undecidedly.

"No, me neither." Shepard concurred. "Looks like the coast is clearâ€|" He paused for a moment, as he continued looking on, before reluctantly speaking up again. "Isâ€| Is there any way you can disrupt the feed again? Maybe by looping the last five minutes back, over and over, or something?"

"I thought you'd never ask!" Tali exclaimed excitedly, as she quickly went to work again. "I might be able to do one better... I think I can hijack the network."

"Hijack the network...?"

"Yeah, the surveillance network." Tali answered, as her masterful fingers danced on her omni-tool's holographic keys. "I've already infiltrated the system. It'll take some doing, but I should be able to reroute access to the surveillance feeds. They already know we're somewhere onboard, anyway. Might as well make things a little harder on 'emâ€| They wanna cut off our communications? That's fine. Let's see how they handle losing their visualsâ€|"

* * *

><p>A silvery, wallet-sized case was split open, revealing three cigarettes remaining inside, held in place by an aluminum clip attached to a spring. An engraved image was partially visible beneath the cigarettes - a long, serpentine creature of some sort. As Commander Andrew Kim reached in and pulled out his third to last cigarette, the obscured image was revealed to be that of a snake. An Asian Krait Viper to be precise. A devious looking creature - angry, beady eyes, bold, black stripes, a slightly pointed head, narrow nostrils, and jagged dorsal scales, like the teeth of a saw, running down the length of its spine.<p>

The one-eyed Commander snapped the case shut, and replaced it in his pocket, as he slid the cigarette between his lips. He then reach in and pulled a plain, silver lighter out of his opposite pocket.

The bridge had returned to its state of tranquil silence, despite the palpable tension in the air. While Kim cupped his hand over his mouth, and lit his cigarette, Tarrik, the stout little orchestrator paced around in small circles, near the front of the bridge, behind Leahr'Haan's seat. Leahr himself was engrossed in his own tasks, working fervently at his master terminal, with multiple screens flashing information before him. Towards the rear of the bridge, a vindictive krogan, with pale green skin, and a lime-green osteoderm brow plate, stood watching the surveillance terminal with keen reptilian eyes, narrowed by the glow of the screen.

Just then, Tarrik stopped pacing, and looked back towards his two henchmen. A sharp hiss from his suit's respirator heralded the end of the silence.

"...Should we at least TRY to lure Shepard out by threatening a hostage?" He imposed insistently, with a shrug of his round, bulgy shoulders.

The maligned head of security pulled the lit cigarette out of his mouth. "I already told you..." He began, exhaling a stream of smoke as he talked. "Shepard won't go for that. We'd be wasting hostages all night. And they're not worth anything to us if they're dead."

"Just relaxâ€¦" He added, sounding a bit tense himself, before turning towards Kargas and the surveillance console. "We'll get 'emâ€¦"

Kim casually strolled over, as he replaced the cigarette between his lips, and rolled it around a little. "Anythingâ€¦?" He asked with a tinge of pessimism in his muffled voice, as he came up beside Kargas, and joined him in his observation.

"Mmmrrâ€¦ Nothing..." The krogan informed with a raspy groan, and a shake of his head. "Wherever he is, he's staying quieter than a kraivore on a hunt."

The two stood there for a few moments, watching the grid of surveillance feeds, hoping to spot some discrepancy - some sign of the Reaper slayer out of the corner of their eyes. And as they watched, the screen at the very top, left hand corner of the grid suddenly flashed to a black, staticky image with the word OFFLINE seated at the center, in bold, red letters.

"Whatâ€¦ What just happened?!" Kim demanded, as he looked up at the snowy visage, baffled "Quarian, get over here! We just lost a camera!"

"What?!" Leahr'Haan exclaimed in stunned astonishment, as he swiveled around in his seat, and shot up - bolting towards the surveillance terminal, and leaving his chair behind, spinning.

When he got there, he took quick note of the blanked out screen at the top, before summoning a blue, holographic keyboard on the tabletop surface of the console. "It can't beâ€¦" He agitatedly whispered to himself, as he immediately went to work, punching away at the keys in a fevered pitch.

"What deck was that cam...era..." Silence gripped the cyclopic Commander, before he could get the rest of his question out, as the problem suddenly repeated itself, to the next feed over. Static, and thenâ€¦ OFFLINE.

"Another one!?" Kargas bellowed in confusion..

"Quarian!" The enraged human Commander shouted. "What the hell did you do?!"

"I-itâ€¦ It's not me!" Leahr stammered in desperation, as he continued to punch fruitlessly away at the keys, yielding little

effect. "Ohâ€¦ How are they doing this?!"

"You better fix this, and find out wheâ€¦!"

No sooner had the ravenous Security Commander begun to bark, than screen after screen started to flicker, and die, with ominous, red lettering. Like a row of dominoes toppling over, the tiled grid of security feeds each began to go blank. One by one, row by row, column by column; OFFLINE. OFFLINE. OFFLINE. OFFLINE.

"Oh no... No, no, no, noâ€¦!" Leahr exclaimed, working at a frenzied pace, as his desperation grew by the second.

"What the hell's going on?!" Kim demanded to know, with a mixture of shock and outrage.

"We'reâ€¦ We're being locked out of the system!" The panicked quarian explained, shaking his head, as he finally gave up and lifted his outmatched hands away from the keys, in shame. "Whoever hacked into our network must be rerouting the accessâ€¦ And I have no idea how to stop it!"

"Didn't you say you were going to find the breach and fix it?!" Kim snarled.

"I-I-Iâ€¦ I did! Well, I thought I didâ€¦" Leahr said pleadingly, as he clutched the sides of his helmet. "I corrected the switched feeds, and changed the access passwords. But I have no idea how they got into the network, in the first placeâ€¦! They must be using some sort of sophisticated backdoor algorithm, or somethingâ€¦!"

"Well can't you lock them out of the system?!" Tarrik insisted, with a sharp hiss of his breath.

"No, because they've already locked US out of the systemâ€¦" Leahr ruefully explained, with a bested, despondent sigh, as he shook his head, let his shoulders droop, and looked up at the barren, static bestrewn screens, flashing with foreboding red letters. "Whoever's doing thisâ€¦ They're better than I am."

* * *

><p>"There!" Tali proclaimed triumphantly, as she held her omni-tool out in front of her, exhibiting the fruits of her labor; a screen showing a vast array of surveillance video from every corner of the ship. "My omni-tool is now the master terminal for all surveillance on this shipâ€¦"<p>

No matter how many times she'd already managed to dazzle him with her technological trickery, it never once failed to impress him.

"Matthewâ€¦" Shepard began, beaming a proud grin in Tali's direction, as he pointed up at her.. "I want you to take a good look. Because that woman is magicâ€¦!"

"Really?!" The enthused Matty beckoned - his little voice squeaking a bit, as he looked up at the veiled machinist.

"Wellâ€¦ Magic fingers anywayâ€¦" The Commander added with a

suggestive bounce of his eyebrows.

Tali forced back a giggle, as she shook her head at John, before quickly changing the subject. "It was a bit more work than I expected." She admitted, under held back traces of laughter, as she took one final look at her omni-tool screen, before dismissing it and putting it away. "They say asari coded firewalls are the bestâ€¦ But that's why I've practiced cracking _them _the most."

John commended her with a gratified nod before shifting his demeanor back to one of stoicism and resolve. He slowly approached Tali and Matty, who were both still standing near the maintenance ladder, and crouched down to meet the child at his level.

"Alright Matthew, I need to you listen to me very carefully, okayâ€¦?" He dictated in a stern, straightforward tone - locking eyes with the boy, as he laid a hand on his shoulder. Every shred of humor and jest was now long gone from his eyes and voice. "This is very important. I need you to stay as close as you can to Tali and me at all times. But if you hear me tell you to run, I want you to run away as fast as you can and find somewhere to hide. No matter what you hear, what you seeâ€¦ you stay put and stay down until we come find you, okay? Got it?"

The harsh severity of John's tone was a bit intimidating to Matty, but it didn't take long for him to understand and accept. "Got it!" He assured in a small, bolstered voice - holding his head up high to show his conviction and lack of fear.

"There's a good little trooperâ€¦!" Shepard said proudly, as he tussled Matty's hair, before standing back up.

Matty smiled when he suddenly felt something pat him softly on the back.

"Don't worry, little kresha." Tali reassured, looking down at him, as she lightly massaged his back. "We're not gonna let anything happen to you. I promise..."

Matty nodded as he looked up towards her face, seeing only a distorted reflection of himself in her glossy, violet mask. It didn't seem to bother him though. When Tali let her arm hang down to the side, he instinctively reached up and took her hand. It was admittedly a new experience for the quarian, but clearly a welcome one, as she smiled behind her faceplate, and lightly squeezed the little hand in her grip.

Meanwhile, Shepard had already made his way back to the adjacent double elevator doors. He drew the pistol off the newly acquired equipment belt around his waist, and held it primed and ready with his right hand, while he worked the hook-like fingers of his left hand into the crevice between the doors. "Okayâ€¦" He said tentatively, glancing back at Tali, with his gun drawn and aimed towards the ceiling. "Stay close, and keep your eyes open..."

* * *

><p>Leahr'Haan stood on the bridge, leaning against the static emitting surveillance terminal - his palms flat on the tabletop surface, and his head hung low over his chest. The perfect

illustration of a beaten man. Kargas had, at long last, detached himself from the now useless console, pacing near the bridge exit, with one hand to his ear - likely informing his Blood-Pack cronies of the new development. Commander Kim and Tarrik, on the other hand, stood-by behind Leahr, waiting expectantly for something to happen, or for something to be doneâ€|<p>

"Fix it." The cyclopic head of security mandated just then, in a calm, deadpan tone of voice, as he crossed his arms.

"Fix itâ€|?" The defeated quarian techie reiterated, with a dejected sigh, as he raised his head and looked up at the flashing red signs on the screen - each one taunting him, calling him a failure. "I can't fix thisâ€|" He said with a slow, pitiful shake of his head. "Not thisâ€|"

Kim clenched his lips and bit down. Seemingly accepting the quarian's statement as fact, he turned around, and took a few short steps away from the terminal. With his back turned, he exhaled a long drawn-out sigh, as he placed his left hand on his hip, and brushed his nonconforming black hair back, with his right. He then stopped and looked towards the ceiling with both arms akimbo, as if he were searching for some sort of divine illumination.

Suddenly, and without warning, the scar-marked head of security spun around with unnatural quickness. He lunged back towards the quarian, brushing past Tarrik and nearly knocking him over in the process. Kim's speed was daunting. He jerked Leahr around, grabbed him by the throat, and fiercely slammed him, back first, against the console - bending him backwards over it before the quarian even knew what was happening.

"Wha-wh-whaâ€|?! What are you doing?!" Leahr begged, in a fear fueled stupor - trembling and nearly in tears, as he clutched the Commander's muscular arm with both his scrawny limbs in a futile effort to pry him off. "Let me go!"

"Fix itâ€|" Kim ordered once more, not elevating his voice in the slightest, as he started to tighten his grip around the quarian's long, narrow neck.

"Argh... I-Iâ€| I told you! It can't be fi-"

Leahr gagged, mid-sentence, on his own words when he saw the brutish officer unsheath his monstrous sized, silver handgun, and bring it up, pressing it against the center of his burgundy faceplate. "O-oh keelahâ€|!"

"Iâ€| saidâ€| fixâ€| itâ€|" Kim demanded again, synchronously pounding the barrel of his handcannon against Leahr'Haan's sturdy helmet with each word he uttered.

"Listen, my boyâ€|" Tarrik calmly interceded, as he approached the writhing, gagging quarian, with the delusion that he was dictating the situation. "When a belligerent man, twice your size, has you bent over backwards, with a gun in your face... I'd sincerely advise you to do everything in your power to satisfy his requests..." He encouraged, with a nonchalant shrug of his shoulders. "I don't wanna see you get hurt, after allâ€|"

"B-butâ€¦| But I don't think I can!"

Kim's stranglehold tightened further, as he flicked a switch on the side of the impressive weapon with his thumb. When it clicked, a bright blue indicator light gleamed on the pistol's side, indicating it was ready to be fired.

"Ack-ughâ€¦| Oâ€¦| Okay!" Leahr conceded, in a froggy, terror stricken voice, keeping his trembling, tri-fingered hands up by his head. "Okay, I'll try! I'll try!"

* * *

><p>Shepard took point, as he led Tali and Matty through the Illustria's loading bay; the nethermost deck on the ship. It was a large, spacious room - easily twice the size of the Normandy's own hangar bay. The three strolled down a long walkway, running down the center of the deck, which led from the elevator doors they had just stepped out of. The path was lined on both sides by rows of the large, submersible aqua-pod vehicles. Each one was mounted onto some sort of elevated, four-wheeled, steel-framed structure, somewhat resembling a speed boat trailer. These were likely the devices used to load, and unload the aqua-pods into and out of the water, as they were equipped with multiple levers, switches, and a sturdy looking winch near the front.<p>

John's eyes were like motion detectors, and his ears like radar dishes, as they proceeded through the cavernous, and seemingly vacated deck. He kept his pistol brandished out in front - ready to greet any surprises that may befall them, with fire. Contrarily, Tali kept her weapon holstered on her hip. But, she also left her right hand resting on it, like a dueling cowboy at high noon, ready for the quickdraw.

She tried to make eye contact with the little boy holding on to her left hand whenever she could - sporadically looking down at him with cheery eyes to let him know he was safe. But she was continuously on her guard.

"Yâ€¦| You're ââ€¦| A cuarnian, rightâ€¦|?" Matty questioned, stuttering to pronounce the complex word, while curiously gazing up at his veiled guardian.

"Why, yes I am." Tali eagerly confirmed, sounding fairly impressed, as she looked down and nodded. "Aren't you a bright little boy. Have you met other quarians beforeâ€¦|?"

"I have a nanny who's ââ€¦| a quâ€¦| quareenâ€¦|" Matty replied, still stumbling over the same word. "Her name's Mara. She's really nice, like you. She plays with me a lotâ€¦|"

"Oh, that sounds wonderfulâ€¦|!" Tali declared, panning her head around for a quick scan of the area, before looking back down at Matty. "I'll bet you two have lots of fun together."

"Uh huh." Matthew agreed with a nod. "She says you have to wear those suits, because if you don't you could get real sick."

"Yes, she's right kresha... We quarians can get sick very easily. But these suits protect us, so that we don't get sick."

"I don't like being sickâ€|" Matty affirmed with a disdainful frown, and a shake of his head. "It's ickyâ€|! My mom makes me take vitamins so that I don't get sick. I told Mara she should take more vitamins, butâ€| I don't think she listened." He said with a sigh, as he bowed his head and shook it disappointedly, inciting a small laugh from both Tali and John. "She calls me little kresha too, sometimes."

"What does that mean, exactly? Little kreshaâ€|" John questioned, intrigued, from his place out in front, glancing back only for a moment, before returning his eyes to their vigilant task. "Is it quarian for little boy?"

"Wellâ€| Sort ofâ€|" Tali began to explain, with a dubious shrug of her shoulders, as the three proceeded on, about half-way through the loading bay. "It's an old quarian word. The closest translation I can think of isâ€| 'little bubble child'"

"Bubble childâ€|?" Matty replied with a baffled furrow of his little brow. "That's weird. Why would you call someone thatâ€|?"

"Wellâ€|" Tali started again, sounding a bit like a school teacher giving a lesson. "We quarians grow up in bubbles... Quarians are not like humans. We have to be protected from germs all the time, even when we're babies. And since we don't get our first suits until we're about three or four, we spend our first few years in special bubbles to protect us."

"Ohâ€|!" Matty acknowledged, as he seemed to understand. "But... How come I'm a kresha? My mom's never put me in a bubble beforeâ€|"

Tali couldn't help herself from giggling - finding the child adorable, as she shook her head and squeezed his hand a bit. "No, of course not, little oneâ€|!" She began to clarify, with traces of laughter still prevalent in her voice. "The word kresha has just stuck with my people. We use it to refer to children. Any children. It's sort of likeâ€| Like when humans say 'sweetie'. Has your mother ever called you sweetie before?"

"Yeah, she calls me that all the time!"

"Right, see. It's sort of like that." Tali continued. She hunkered down a little and brought her voice to a level just above a whisper. "You knowâ€| My mother used to call me kresha even after I was already big. Do you mind me calling you kreshaâ€|?"

"No, it's okay." Matty consented, with a happy grin. "I like it."

Tali smiled affectionately behind her mask - tittering a little, as she lightly brushed the side of his cheek with the backs of her gloved fingers, before standing back up to an upright position. After losing herself for a moment in the blithe conversation, she was surprised to see how far they'd gone when she looked up and suddenly realized they'd already reached the end of the walkway.

John put a hand up at his side, halting their advance, as they came to the massive hangar door at the rear of the deck. It was an impressive gate - roughly fifteen feet tall and thirty-feet wide. And

from the elevator doors at the other end of the deck, it appeared wholly intact. But now, up close, where the rows of aqua-pods could no longer obscure their peripheral vision, it was clear that was not the case.

A closer inspection revealed a gaping hole near the left edge of the hangar sized gate. It was an arch shaped cavity, about seven to eight feet high, with a wide girth. The breach was sloppily cut out of the steel with some sort of plasma torch - evident from the solidified blobs of molten steel around the edges of the opening. The cutout slab was still laying directly in front of the hole, where it had toppled over and remained undisturbed. And a white light spilled out onto the floor, from within.

"Wait hereâ€¦" Shepard ordered, in a low tone, over his shoulder, as he primed with weapon with both hands.

He bolted ahead, towards the makeshift entrance, and pressed his back against the hangar door, just beside the opening. With his sidearm up and ready, he cautiously leaned over, ever so slowly, and peered in. Inside, was a short umbilical corridor connecting the two ships together. It closely resembled the jetways that connect to starships in docking stations. It looked to be securely fastened, but it still rocked back and forth with the turbulence of the moving ship. Beyond that, he could detect very little. The other end of the umbilical opened up into what looked like the cargo hold of the other, much smaller ship - evident by a number of scattered metallic crates visible through the opening. But whether or not the ship was occupied would remain to be seen.

Just then, John took a deep breath, and let out a loud, sharp whistle, directed into the umbilical. Then he waitedâ€¦ The grip around his gun tightened. He tuned his ears as best as he could, listening for the slightest trace of chatter or footsteps. His eyes scanned the opening, watching closely for the tiniest shadow to float by. But all that came was the rumble of the engines. A few seconds passed, and he whistled again. This time, louder than before. But the result was no different. Perceiving no visible danger, John looked back towards Tali, and signaled her over with a nudge of his head.

Tali nodded. "Okay, come on little one." She urged, as she held on tight to the boy's hand and dashed over towards John. When she reached the hangar door, she immediately pressed her back against it, beside Shepard, while also holding Matty back, flush against the gate.

"This is definitely where they boarded." John explained, with a slow, uneasy nod of his head. "Doesn't look like there's anyone still on-board..."

"Normally, I'd scan for movement or lifesignsâ€¦" Tali offered up, with a dejected sigh, and a regretful shrug of her shoulders. "But, like I saidâ€¦ left my combat mods back on the Normandy."

"It's alright, just stick closeâ€¦" Shepard instructed, as he raised his gun and turned the corner, into the umbilical.

Tali nodded in acknowledgement, before looking down to address Matty. "You stay RIGHT behind me, okay?" She urged in a sweet but serious

tone of voice, as she held onto him with her left hand, and drew her own weapon with her right - however keeping the safety on.

Tali turned the corner, and followed John into the narrow umbilical corridor. It was almost like stepping onto a rickety rope bridge, swaying in the wind, as it trembled and quivered behind the *Illustria*.

"Mmmphâ€¦" Matty let out a frightened groan, as a clear semblance of fear overtook his expression. He pressed up against Tali, as tightly as he could, while they made their way forward.

"There's no chance this'll break off, right?" John questioned, somewhat sharing the child's anxieties, as he glanced around the umbilical, which looked like it could snap off from the rest of the ship at any moment.

"No, both ships are inside the *Illustria*'s mass effect envelope." Tali reassured. "And the magnetic clamps outside are holding us in place... This is just a little turbulence. It's not enough to separate the connection. Don't be afraid, kresha..." She said soothingly, as she caressed the back of his small hand with her thumb, while he practically clung to her leg.

Shepard was the first to clear the umbilical, and step out into the hijacker's vessel. It was an unimpressive sight to say the least. The cargo bay, which made up about eighty to ninety percent of the entire ship, was quite spacious, but it was littered with scattered tools, discarded mech parts, and a few odd metallic crates laying around, and stacked in no particular order. The metal walls were a bleak shade of gray, speckled with brown spots of rust. Two large rails, coated with chipping yellow paint, ran parallel along the ceiling, with a traveling bridge spanning the gap. The bridge supported an overhead crane, from which a large, pincer-like clamp hung suspended at the end, like a giant claw crane game. Simply put, it was a travelling warehouse. Frankly, the most attractive features in the room were the port and starboard observation windows, which showcased a nocturne of streaking stars zooming by at speeds faster than light.

"Thisâ€¦ This is a C-24 Tregen Class cargo freighterâ€¦" Tali proclaimed upon entering - sounding mildly astonished, as she looked around the unkempt room. "You can tell by the shapes of the windowsâ€¦ These things are practically antiquesâ€¦!"

"It smells in hereâ€¦" Matty disgustedly declared, as he wrinkled his nose, and pinched it with his free hand.

"Yes it does, buddyâ€¦" Shepard concurred, placing a hand on his hip, as he glanced around. The pungence in the air was a stale, moldy kind of odor that seemed to come and go - the same kind of smell one might encounter in an old, dank basement. "Let's not hang aroundâ€¦ How do we go about getting that message out?"

Two red sensor lights flared up, just then. As the three stood gathered near the front of the cargo bay, little did they suspect that they had just been detected by something massive, hidden behind a stack of crates.

"The jamming device'll be on the bridge." Tali informed, as she

pointed down a short hallway, leading from the cargo bay, to a door at the bow end of the ship. "Now that I've got my tools, I should have no problem reconfig-"

KSSSH! Tali was interrupted by a loud, startling hiss, coming from the center of the cargo bay. John and Tali immediately jumped at the sound, and aimed their weapons in its direction.

"What the hell was that?!" John demanded, keenly brandishing his weapon, as he tried to peer around the stack of crates obscuring the sound's source.

"...Could be the ship plasma venti-"

KSSSH! Tali was again interrupted by the sound. This time it was accompanied by a series of motorized whirrs, and a visible jet of steam shooting up from behind the crates. Suddenly, something began to rise and tower over the metal boxes, as it stood up from it's compacted, almost fetal-like position.

"HALT." The gargantuan YMIR Class Heavy Assault Mech demanded, with it's back to the three, as it stood up and began to turn itself around. "INTRUDERS DETECTED. I AM AUTHORIZED TO USE LETHAL FORCE."

Shepard exhaled a sapped, downcast sigh, as his face already began to reflect a look of exhaustion. "Of courseâ€¦"

20. Chapter 20: Unstoppable

****Salvation: Episode I - The Taking of the Carmenta
Illustria****

Disclaimer: This fan-fiction is part of an episodic series taking place after Salvation: A Half-Life/Mass Effect Universe Fan Fiction, which will lead directly to its sequel, Salvation II: Project Prometheus. These episodes and sequel take place OUTSIDE of the Mass Effect 3 continuity. Characters property of their respective companies, Half-Life created by Valve and Mass Effect created by Bioware.

****Chapter 20: Unstoppable****

"TRESPASSERS WILL BE ELIMINATED." The YMIR announced in a monotone, authoritarian voice, as it raised its right arm-mounted assault cannon.

Shepard's eyes widened. "Down!" He shouted, diving onto Tali and Matty, and forcing them to the ground, behind a stray crate, just as a deluge of rapid-fire rounds was suddenly unleashed upon them.

The three laid huddled on the floor together, as the barrage of high capacity thermal slugs drilled into the crate, slowly tearing it asunder as if it were made of cardboard. A look of sheer terror overtook the innocent child's face, as he clenched his eyes shut, and pressed his hands to his ears, in an attempt to block out the thunderous, deafening noise.

"Wh-wh-what's happening?!" He pleaded, with a whimper, as he began to

quiver in fear.

"Tali!" Shepard began, in a calculative tone, as he looked up at the umbilical entrance a couple of yards away. "I'm going to get up and draw it's fire. While it's distracted, you get Matthew to safety, alright?"

"I-! Okay!" Tali only hesitated for a moment, not wanting to leave his side. But seeing the trembling, terror stricken child nestled in her arms, and knowing that their cover was quickly being eaten away by the roaring salvo, she knew better than to argue. "But be careful John, please!" She implored, as she briefly caressed the side of his face.

"I will." Shepard asserted with a nod, as he moved over and endowed the top of her faceplate with a quick kiss. "Get ready." He instructed, raising his handgun, as Tali strengthened her hold around little Matty, frozen in fear.

Out of the corner of his eye, John spotted a scrawny, discarded, robotic arm, that looked like it would fit the LOKI classification of mechs. He snatched up the arm, and hurled it over the crate - tossing it over as if he were lobbing a grenade.

The YMIR's optic sensors immediately picked up on the hurtling object, and locked on. The instant it turned away and prepared to fire on the new target, John shot to his feet, and bolted to his left, towards a second crate, sitting closer to the wall opposite the umbilical entrance. By that time, the mechanical brute had already analyzed that the flying limb was but an inanimate object, and its sensors detected the pounding of Shepard's shoes, as he broke for cover. It immediately turned its cannons towards the sound, and opened fire, just as the Commander dove and rolled behind the second crate.

Rounds pierced and ricocheted off of the metallic box, as tiny bits of shredded metal rained down on him. "Go!" He yelled out, as he blindly raised his gun over the top of the crate, and fired aimlessly in the mech's direction, in an attempt to keep its attention on him.

With the YMIR distracted, Tali frantically scooped the frightened child up in her arms, and took a split second glance in John's direction, before darting out of the room like an olympic sprinter, leaving Shepard to fend for himself. The Commander retracted his weapon, and rested his back against the crate - sighing and shaking his head at the dismal situation. As the fusillade continued, he brought the standard-issue sidearm up to his face, and turned it sideways, checking for some type of selector switch.

"Damn it!" He griped to himself - lowering the pistol, and banging the back of his head against the slowly disintegrating crate, after not finding what he was looking for. "No armor piercing, no incendiary rounds, no hi-ex, nothing!" He sighed, as the mechanized beast continued to unload a seemingly inexhaustible volley of thermal rounds in his direction. "Alright John, now what?"

Tali ran back into the Illustria's loading bay, carrying Matty in her arms, and whipping her head back and forth, as she searched for a

suitable safe place for him.

"Wh-Whâ€¦ What's happening?!" The frantic boy beckoned, with twin streaks of tears pouring out of his eyes, as he listened to the unceasing barrage of gunfire coming from the neighboring ship. "What was that big thing?! Is it gonna get us?!"

"No, no, don't be afraid, kresha. It's okayâ€¦" Tali assured, trying to mask the alarm in her own voice, as she rubbed the terrified child's back a little, in a desperate attempt to quell his fears. Just then, her eyes focused on the two columns of aqua-pods lining both sides of the loading bay's walkway. She immediately selected one a few rows down, and rushed towards the entry hatch. She yanked on the handle, and the door opened with a downward swing, creating a small flight of stairs, which Tali practically jumped over as if they were a hurdle.

The inside of the submersible was dark and shadowy, causing her to nearly trip over a plush, cushioned leather seat inside. With no time to look for a light switch, she sat Matty down into the seat, and crouched down before him.

"Matty listen. I need you to stay here, okay?"

"No!" He screamed, adamantly shaking his head, as the pouring tears continued to etch tracks on his cheeks. "No, don't leave me by myself! Please!"

"No, no, shhh-shhhhâ€¦ It's okay. It's okay." Tali assured, as she anxiously squeezed both his hands with both of hers. "Listen. I promised that we wouldn't let anything happen to you, remember? And we won'tâ€¦ But right now, I really have to go back and help John, little one. And I really REALLY need to you to stay here, and not come out no matter what, okay? Can you promise me that? Pleaseâ€¦?"

Matty sniffled and whimpered. His chin trembled, his lips quivered, and his eyes were glossy and red from his tears. But at that instant, he stood up straight, wiped his eyes, and nodded. "Okay... I promise, Tali..."

"Oh, thank you little oneâ€¦" Tali gratefully bestowed, as she pulled him in for a brief embrace, before turning and leaping back out the door. "Remember, stay put no matter what!"

She pushed the door up, sealing Matty inside. Now, the only remaining light in the dark, confined space splashed in from a curved window, panning the front of the vehicle. Matty hastily wriggled out of his seat, and rushed over. He tiptoed as high as he could to peer out of the window, just in time to watch Tali draw her gun and charge back into the adjoining umbilical, through the cutout opening.

"John!" She shouted, as she rushed to the very edge of the umbilical entrance. As she looked over, she was appalled to see him hunkering down behind half a box, with his hand shielding his head. The entire front part of the crate looked like a ravaged leaf that had met with a hungry caterpillar. Shepard would intermittently stick the barrel of his pistol around the corner of the metal container, futilely returning fire when he could. But each round he managed to land just seemed to ricochet harmlessly off the mechanical brute.

"Tali, stay there!" He yelled back, once he spotted her, holding his hand up to her, like a stop sign.

"John, what do we do?!"

"Iâ€¦ I don't know!" He shouted, at a loss. Just then, his face turned away with a jerk, as it was suddenly nicked by a searing hot piece of tiny, shredded metal. He sighed in angry frustration, as he turned back. "We're not gonna get anywhere with these damn cap guns!" He asserted, as he raised the pistol and waved it around. "The armor on that thing could take a thousand of these rounds! We gotta figure out some other way to take it outâ€¦!"

At that moment, the incessant thundering of gunfire came to an abrupt stop, leaving Shepard's ears ringing. A clacking sound came, as it reloaded its weapon chamber, giving John just enough of a window to pop up from behind the box and take a few rapid, yet carefully placed shots. Utilizing the same thought process, Tali too swung out from behind her cover, with her sidearm brandished. They both zeroed in on the mech's head, and it's two semi-circle shaped, red optical sensors, as if they were bullseyes - the rule of thumb being; always go for the head. Or in Tali's case; go for the optics! But again, their rounds just seemed to harmlessly ricochet off the glass surface of it's face, before it raised its now reloaded arm back up, for another volley. John dropped down again, just as the rapid-fire flood resumed.

"That's ballistic glass!" Tali called out, from her spot at the umbilical entrance. "These guns aren't powerful enough to penetrate it!"

Shepard groaned, and shook his head. "There's gotta be some way we can stop it!" He shouted, as he ejected the pistol's depleted thermal clip, and pulled a fresh one off his security belt. "Tali, this crate's going fast...!" He informed, feeling the reverberant pounding of the box against his back, as he loaded the new clip into the handgun's chamber. "Is there any way you can overload it's system, or something?!"

"Not remotelyâ€¦!" She explained, with a regretful shake of her head. "I can deactivate it by manually pulling it's cerebral circuit. But a YMIR's programming is designed to resist cyber warfare. There's nothing I can do from here, without my combat modsâ€¦!"

"But John, listenâ€¦!" She continued, as she readied her weapon. "My kinetic barriers are built into my suit! I'll run out and get it's attention, and while it's distracted you get out of there!"

"No, wait!" Shepard abruptly ordered, putting a hand up to the chivalrous quarian before she could charge into the room. "Tali, this thing will tear through your k-barriers in two seconds flatâ€¦! I got another idea!" He assured, as he grabbed a long, solid steel pipe resting on the floor, nearby, and dragged it over towards him. "Try to draw it's fire, but stay in cover! These things are powerful, but they're slow and clunkyâ€¦! Maybe it'll be more vulnerable to a physical approach!"

At that instant, a round drilled a hole straight through his sheltering crate, just above his left shoulder, grazing the tip of

his ear. John slouched completely down, as low as he could go, as the hulking mech continued to chisel away at the rest of the crate with it's non-stop barrage.

"Hey you!" Tali yelled out, as she stepped out from the inside of the umbilical corridor, and started firing wildly at the mechanized beast. "Over here, bosh'tet!"

SECONDARY TARGET ACQUIRED - Read a heads up display in the mech's visual interface, as a red targeting reticule suddenly zeroed in on the slender framed quarian. The YMIR ceased it's assault on Shepard and turned its arm-mounted assault cannon towards Tali. Before it could fire, John suddenly vaulted over the destroyed remains of the crate - wielding the heavy steel pipe like a baseball bat.

"AAAARGH!" He snarled, as he charged the YMIR head-on. CLANG! The echo of steel pounding against steel blared throughout the cargo bay, as he slammed the pipe down, as hard as he could, on the hardened titanium-alloy shell of the monster's forearm, leaving barely a noticeable nick. The mech immediately reacted. Computing that it was under attack, it assessed that it should deal with the more aggressive of it's two targets first. CLANG! Came the sound of another blow, as Shepard struck it once more, leaving no recognizable damage. The YMIR tried turning itself around, to face it's assailant's direction, but John followed its rotation perfectly, keeping himself away from the barrel end of its cannon. Determined, Shepard grit his teeth, pummeling, and striking it repeatedly, over and over across various areas of it's tank-like chassis. But nothing he did seemed to affect it. The blows only left a stinging sensation in his palms, from the vibrations of the pipe.

Seeing that she was no longer the target, Tali too rushed ahead at the mech, firing carefully so as not to hit Shepard, but the lumbering YMIR's towering height made it an easy target. She tried searching for any points of vulnerability; joints, exposed wiring, cracks in the armor, anything. But every shot she fired simply seemed to glance off, as if she were throwing pebbles at the thing.

As the mech continued to turn itself around, trying to target the mosquito-like Commander, it suddenly stopped in its tracks. This surprised Shepard a bit, but it didn't stop him from maintaining his physical assault. Unexpectedly, the YMIR's entire upper body spun around, like a swiveling office chair, leaving it's base stationary, and facing the other way.

"Whoa!" Shepard exclaimed, as he ducked under the mech's incoming forearm, which nearly took his head off. As he stood back up, he found himself standing right between the monster's two extended, gargantuan arms, staring directly up at it's face.

Perhaps on instinct alone, John cocked his arms back, swung the pipe, and CLANG! He landed a fierce blow against the YMIR's head, leaving it twisted to one side. Giving no quarter, Shepard raised the pipe, and reeled his arms back once more, as the mech slowly corrected it's contorted neck. But before he could take his swing, the mech took one of it's own - slamming it's bulky, armor plated forearm into the Commander's back, like a karate chop, knocking the steel pipe out of his hand, and sending him crashing to the ground.

It was like getting hit by a car. Shepard writhed on the floor, with his back arched, his eyes clenched shut, and his teeth gritted in pain, as an agonizing jolt shot through his back and shoulders. Even so, he fought to ignore his affliction, and struggled to sit up, and pry his eyes open. That's when he saw the mechanical giant towering over him, with the barrel of its assault cannon a few inches away from his face.

CLANG! Something suddenly struck, and bounced off of the mech's head, as it's arm mounted cannon began clacking, indicating it was being reloaded. In the midst of the distraction, Shepard rolled out of the way, and scrambled back to his feet.

"Hey, bosh'tet!" Tali screamed, firing her handgun from one hand, and hurling a set of heavy pliers at the back of the YMIR's head, like a boomerang, from the other. "I'm over here! Come get me!"

"Tali, look out!" Shepard urged, drawing his gun, and shooting feverishly, as he watched the massive mech spin it's upper body back around, in Tali's direction, to match it's still forward facing set of legs.

With it's assault cannon reloaded, it stomped it's way towards the quarian - each step thundering like an earthquake, as it opened fire once more. Tali dove down, with cat-like quickness, behind an untouched crate, which quickly became riddled with bullet pocks.

"We can't keep doing thisâ€¦!" Tali said to herself, as she hunkered down for cover. "There's got to be some way to incapacitate it!"

The stomping metal ox continued to advance in her direction, leaving Shepard behind, as it unleashed a torrent of rapid-fire slugs.

John took a frantic, despaired look all around the cargo bay, hoping to spot something he could use as a weapon, or anything that could turn the tables in their favor. But it was all the same old junk he'd seen before. Except for one bold red object he spotted out of the corner of his eye. He dashed over towards the back of the cargo bay, and snatched the small, red fire extinguisher off the rear wall. It was smaller than average fire extinguishers, with the cannister being only a little larger than an aerosol can of hairspray. But it's contents were highly pressurized, and that's what mattered.

Just then, the relentless machine stopped. It halted its advance, and withdrew fire; lowering it's mass accelerator assault-cannon equipped right arm, only to raise its high explosive RPG launcher equipped left. A distinctive click was heard, followed by a motorized whirr, as it loaded its first rocket into the chamber - a sound Tali knew all too well. Her eyes widened in alarm behind her mask, as she shot to her feet, and ran. But, as a red targeting reticule locked on, and tracked her movements, she realized there wasn't anything in sight suitable enough to shield her from a blast like that. At that moment, as it readied it's payload with a quarian in the crosshairs, the monstrous machine began bucking, and thrashing wildly.

"Argh! Where you going?!" Tali suddenly heard John yell out, forcing her to stop and look up in awe at the flailing brute. "I never said I was through with you!"

Tali looked on, watching in amazement, as the mechanical horror

stomped the floors, and swung itself around, revealing the diminutive Commander Shepard scaling it's back - straddling it like a hungry stoat on a rabbit, with a red canister in his hand.

"Oh, keelahâ€¦! John!" She yelled out, as she watched helplessly.

Shepard continued to buck the wild bronco, so to speak, as he pulled himself up to the spot between the YMIR's two titanium shoulder blades. He raised the extinguisher clutched in his left hand, and jammed it down hard, into the gap between the mech's neck and left shoulder joint - driving it in, like a pick to a block of ice.

With his objective accomplished, he released his grip on the mech, and leapt off - rolling as he hit the floor. He came to rest flat on his back, already drawing his pistol out of the holster, as the behemoth turned to face him - pounding the floor with metallic stomps.

Shepard looked up, and luckily enough, the hazard-red extinguisher was still lodged in place - it's tip visible just above the metal monster's left shoulder. As it locked on the laying Commander's face, and moved its assault cannon into firing position, Shepard crossed his left arm in front of him, and held it away from his body - using it to stabilize his right arm, which held the silver, standard-issue sidearm aimed up at the tiny, red target.

"Sorry, palâ€¦!" The Commander said in a cocksure tone of voice, as he carefully steadied his aim. "But you're a fire hazardâ€¦!"

POW!

With a thunderous crack, a flash of light burst forth from the handgun's barrel - spitting a molten thermal round out, en route to the fire extinguisher. KSSSHâ€¦! The highly pressurized canister hissed, just then, squirting a fine stream of foam where the bullet had penetrated. The mech turned its head in the direction of the sound, trying to look towards its shoulder, when suddenlyâ€¦! BOOM!

An explosion ruptured the small canister, creating a spewing cloud of fire, foam, and red shrapnel that completely engulfed the mech's upper body. Shepard rolled onto his side, shielding his face and head from the ensuing blast, when he suddenly heard a loud, reverberant thud. He slowly rolled back and unshielded his eyes, expecting to see the big metal lunk, flat on it's back, with it's head blown clean off it's shoulders. Instead, what he saw, was a big metal lunk, dripping with white, frothy foam, with flurries of sparks shooting out from exposed circuits and wires, in the charred socket where its left arm used to be. The monster's entire chassis was left rattling from the percussion. But it was still on its feet...

"John, are you alright?!" Tali beseeched, as she ran and knelt by his side.

Shepard placated her with only a slow, inattentive shake of his head, as he stared intently up at the YMIR's foam covered face, waiting for something to happen.

A static laced heads up display within the mech's visual interface told the story.

CRITICAL SYSTEM DAMAGE DETECTED.

I/O ERROR WITH DEVICE 28x04.2 RPG-42T LAUNCHER

SECONDARY WEAPON SYSTEMS OFFLINE.

And as the foam slowly began to slide off it's face in clumps of white, it's two glaring red optic sensors were revealed, which quickly locked back on.

"Oh, come on!" John exclaimed, frustratedly.

"Keelah, not again!" Tali said with a sigh, sharing in his despondence, as she tugged at his arm to help him get on his feet.

Clack! Came the chilling, mechanical sound of the brute reloading its auto-assault cannons yet again, as it tracked Shepard's motions with it's only remaining arm.

Seeing no other viable option, as they shuffled back and forth in the mech's crosshairs, John shoved Tali aside, out of its targeting field of view, and lunged forward, straight towards metal monstrosity. The echo of gunfire tore through the cargo bay once more, as Shepard dove down, head first, and rolled straight through it's two, pillar-like legs. Bullet pocks riddled the cargo bay floor, as the YMIR tried to follow the Commander's adrenaline fueled path, but it was far too slow.

"Tali, just go!" Shepard demanded, as he popped up behind the mech. "Get outta here! I'll see what I can do about this thing!"

"I won't just leave you here!" She asserted, as the YMIR, oddly enough, started to turn around in an attempt to reacquire Shepard as its primary target - likely assessing him as the greater threat of the two.

"Go, I said!" He ordered, as he swiftly picked up his previously lost metal pipe, only to continue the same bob, weave, and bludgeon routine from before.

"Argh!" Tali groaned, with a mixture of anger, frustration, and despair, as she tried to formulate a plan. "Pulling its cerebral circuit is the only way we're ever gonna stop that thing!"

Suddenly, as the bangs and clangs continued to ring out, she remembered something. She immediately looked up towards the ceiling, spotting the suspended crane claw, like a gift from above. "That's it!" She jubilantly exclaimed to herself, as she quickly looked around the room, searching for a means to control it. That's when she spotted a small control terminal, no bigger than a podium, in the far, back corner of the cargo bay.

"John, keep it busy!" She shouted, as she dashed across the room, towards the console.

"What?!" He responded in confusion - watching Tali whisk by, as he

continued to pummel the mech's hardened armor shell, while trying to stay as far away from it's gun as he possibly could. "Tali, what are you doing?!"

"Just keep it busy!" She reiterated, as she reached the console, and stepped behind it.

Tali looked down at the controls. This ship really was an antique. The console wasn't even equipped with a holographic interface. Instead, it was just an amalgam of buttons, switches, and dials. Still, she seemed to know her way around them. She immediately pressed a large, green button, at the top right hand corner of the console, labeled POWER. Normally, this would cause the entire console to light up. But in this instanceâ€¦ Nothing.

"Whatâ€¦?" Tali muttered to herself, perplexed, as she pushed the button again, but the result was no differentâ€¦

"Argh, uhm, Taliâ€¦!" Shepard called out again, from the midst of his predicament, dancing the lumbering mech around in the center of cargo bay, while intermittently trying to pummel it to pieces - groaning with every swing. "Seeing as how, rarrgh! ...You've chosen to, umph! ...Ignore me, raahh! â€¦If you're gonna do something, do it soon!"

"I'm trying!" Tali cried out, as she just began flicking every switch, turning every dial, and mashing every button in sight. "Oh keelah, come onâ€¦!" Just then, a spark of life. The console hummed, and became aglow for a split second, before fading to darkness, yet again. "I said come on, you bosh'tet!" She snarled fiercely, as she delivered a hard, stiff kick to the bottom of the console. As if acknowledging her order, or fearing her wrath, the kick brightly illuminated every last button on the control panel. "Thank youâ€¦!" She bestowed with a sigh, as she took hold of a prominent joystick on the console, and looked to the crane above.

John panted with every labored breath he took, as he continued his onslaught, utilizing a stick and move tactic. Sweat dripped from his forehead, leaving his white tux shirt collar drenched. Lifting his arms got harder and harder, with every swing he took. Especially since, not having had a proper period of convalescence, they were still weary and sore from their fight against the Reapers. His leg wound throbbed, his muscles were stiff, the sweat stung his eyes, and he was technically still on vacation, but even so, he soldiered on. His target was the mech's mass accelerator equipped forearm. Perhaps, with enough strikes, he could do enough damage to render its assault cannon inoperable. To quote a quarian marine he knew; "Kill it with bug bites."

Just then, while still struggling to stay a few steps ahead of the clunky drone, he noticed that the traveling bridge suspending the crane on the ceiling, began to move.

"John, see if you can keep it in one place!" She suggested, as she pulled back on the joystick - causing the overhead crane to perfectly mirror her motions.

"Keep it in one place, she saysâ€¦!" He grumbled to himself, as he tried to dance the YMIR around in a small circle. "That's right big boy, just chase your tail..."

As the travelling bridge was situated directly above them, the claw now began moving along it, like a train on a track, as Tali did her best to position it perfectly over the metal behemoth. But from her vantage point, she had to do it by feel and judgement, alone. "Uhmâ€¦" Tali muttered, making tiny adjustments on the joystick, as she vied for perfect placement over her restless, pirouetting, one-armed target. "...Andâ€¦ There!" She blurted out, when she suddenly found her mark, and slammed her open palm down on a large, red button. The pincer-like claw opened like the jaws of a shark, as it was let down by a series of thick, high tension cables.

When he heard the mechanical buzz coming from the ceiling, John looked up and was shocked to see the a set of steel, yellow jaws being dropped almost right on top of him. Shepard dropped the pipe, and grunted as he dove out of the way - just narrowly avoiding getting chomped, as the claw slammed down, only managing to scrape the front side of the giant drone, and clamping nothing but it's one good arm.

"Ohâ€¦ Sorry!" Tali bestowed apologetically, as John looked up at her, from the floor, stunned and wide-eyed.

Just then, a thunderous clatter arose, as the monster mech began struggling to free it's ensnared arm - actually managing to lift the heavy claw, and slam it back down with incredible force. Determined not to let her catch get loose, Tali sneered, and slammed on another red button, labeled "retract". The cables began to tighten, slowly pulling the claw back up towards the ceiling, and the mech up with it. But, as the YMIR's arm was pulled up, it proved too heavy for such a sloppy, unsecured connection. As the mech ascended a mere two feet off the ground, it's arm managed to scrape out of it's constraint, causing it to come crashing to the floor, onto it's back, with a deafening metallic slam. As it moved it's feet about in a hapless attempt to stand back up, like a knocked over wind-up toy, Tali made a fast adjustment to the crane's position again. Completely unfazed, and determined to be done with this monstrosity once and for all, she slammed on the release button, causing the claw to open up and descend once more. This time, as if the mech had a bullseye painted on it, the claw clamped down securely around it's torso, at the abdominal area. This, however, left it's only remaining arm, still equipped with a mass accelerator cannon, dangling free at it's side. Tali pulled back on the joystick, hoisting the flailing behemoth up, though being careful not to lift it too high. After about four feet, she stopped, leaving it thrashing and kicking, as it dangled above the cargo bay floor.

Tali rushed out from behind the controls, and bolted over to the unruly machine. She ran around, towards its head, as it rocked and swung around - fervently flailing its arms, kicking its legs, and generally doing anything it could to break free of it's bondage. When she reached the YMIR's sturdy, helmet sized head, she was immediately met there by Shepard, who was taken aback by the sight of the suspended monster.

"Tali, what are you doing?!" He beckoned, coming to her side, as she struggled and failed to get a hold of the tussling mech's head. "And where'd you leave Matthew?!"

"Matty's fine!" She asserted, still trying to grab for the elusive

metal head. "I left him outside, in one of those pod things! And I told you-" She continued, as she finally managed to grab hold of it's cylindrical cranium. "-I have to pull the cerebral circuit!"

At that moment, while she ran her fingers along the back of it's 'skull', looking for a specific panel latch, the YMIR began flailing it's arm around towards them, like a person swatting at something in their hair. "Look out!" Shepard cried, as he grabbed her and yanked her out of the monster's reach, before she could be bludgeoned. Suddenly, and without warning, it began firing it's assault cannon wildly, in all directions. Both of them rapidly ducked down, and darted over to the left side of the hanging mech - out of it's firing range.

"Arghâ€¦!" Groaned the irritated quarian, as she clenched her shaking hands into fists, and stomped an enraged foot on the floor. "Why didn't you blow off it's right arm, instead of it's leftâ€¦?!" Tali demanded, out of sheer rage and frustration, without thinking, coercing Shepard to look back at her, with a dumbfounded look in his eyes.

"Hey, if that thing were to start shooting rockets off in here, we all go up!" He asserted, shouting over the aimless and incessant clatter of gunfire - a few rounds of which ricocheted dangerously close to the starboard windows. "Besidesâ€¦!" He continued, rubbing the back of his neck, as his tone grew humble and somewhat embarrassed. "I was uh... going for the head, not just the arm..."

HINDERANCE DETECTED - the words flashed within the mech's visual interface, as it stared up at the traveling bridge crane, holding it captive - it's computerized mind deriving terabytes of data with every passing millisecond. ANALYSIS IN PROGRESS.

Just then, the mechanized colossus ceased its berserk barrage, and dangled listlessly like a lure at the end of a fishing line. "It's reloading, now's our chance!" Tali exclaimed, as she charged towards the YMIR's head once more, with John not far behind.

ANALYSIS COMPLETE - read the mech's heads up display, highlighting several points of interest within the crane's railings, as Tali reached it's armored skull for the second time. STRUCTURAL VULNERABILITIES FOUND.

Tali ran her fingers along the rear of the mech's head and at last, providence! She found the small latch she was looking for, and pulled on it. A tiny, but heavy, panel on the back of the armor plated fiend's head came off, and fell to the floor with a clang, exposing the wiring and circuitry housed within the its head.

But suddenly, in the instant before she could reach in, and yank out the desired circuits, the deafening sound of rapid-fire rounds thundered once more, as the YMIR laid siege to specifically targeted spots on the traveling bridge. A shower of sparks and a hail of shredded metal rained down, as it's high-capacity slugs sliced through the beams with ease.

As abruptly as the mech had started firing, the steel fasteners in the ceiling began to creak, when suddenly the whole thing collapsed! John grabbed Tali, who was valiantly still trying to work her fingers

into the exposed cavity, and yanked her back, just as the entire right side of the traveling bridge tore out of the ceiling, and crumbled to the floor, on top of the mech, in a cloud of smoke and sparks.

A gaping hole in the ceiling revealed the exposed cables, and wires tucked underneath the still intact fuselage of the ship, as a few beams and bulkheads collapsed. Had the damage been only a little more extensive, the ship's outer layer would have surely been breached.

Shepard and Tali looked on, in awe, at the destruction. And then, just as the dust had begun to settle, something stirred from under the debris. The relentless machine sat up, lifting the heavy, solid steel beam off it's chest, like it was made of wood, as it slowly began to rise to its feet.

"Ancestors help usâ€¦ How are we supposed to stop this thing?!" Tali pleaded, actually exhibiting marked traces of fear in her voice, as she took a few slow steps backwards.

Apart from it's already severed arm, the YMIR showed severe signs of further damage, as sparks sputtered out from various spots on it's body. It's chestplate was badly dented, and bashed in. The ballistic glass on its face was cracked. And it appeared to have lost the use of the lower part of its right leg. But despite it all, it's programming mandated that it eliminate any and all intruders. And once it got to its feet, it would fulfill it's directives, no matter what.

Shepard pulled the laughably underpowered handgun from his holster once more. A handgun intended for security guards. With no other options left, he ejected the exhausted clip, and yanked a fresh one off his belt, before the spent one could hit the floor. With the same fury he showed the Reapers burning in his eyes, he slammed the new clip into place, flicked the safety off, and raised his weapon at the monster straightening itself out, before him. That's when he spotted the twitching wireâ€¦

A live-wire that had collapsed, along with half the ceiling, jolted and jumped on one of the collapsed bulkheads, as it spat out intermittent flurries of sparks. As the idea suddenly clicked in his head, he simply dropped the gun and charged forward, towards the sparking wire, with Tali looking on.

As the hurting mech staggered to it's feet, its red targeting reticule zeroed in on the inexorable Commander, bolting across the room once more. It slowly raised it's damaged, but fully reloaded, assault cannon, intent on aiming it at Shepard's head. John snatched the wire up, grabbing it from its unexposed rubber insulation. And without stopping, as the wire jolted and sparked in his hand, he turned and made a b-line straight for the hulking machine.

TARGET ACQUIRED

In the split millisecond before the incredibly durable YMIR Class Heavy Assault Mech could fire on it's target, a sneering, gritting Commander Shepard jammed the exposed end of the severed live-wire straight into the mech's gun barrel.

The crackling buzz of electricity could be heard, as the lights on the entire cargo ship flickered and dimmed, like the power trying to say on during a lightning storm. The mech's entire structure jerked, and spasmed violently, as the electrical current surged through it's body, ravaging it's circuits and systems. Its two red optic sensors persistently stayed lit, refusing to go out, until finally they started to flickered and dim. Shepard held the wire in place, as his cold eyes stared up at the behemoth's, watching it struggle to 'stay awake', before their red glow finally faded to darknessâ€|

Shepard yanked the wire out, causing the mech to go out on it's feet. It slouched over, powered down, with it's head drooping over it's chest, and it's arm hanging lifelessly at its side. John panted, taking breaths in droves, as he tossed the wire aside, discarding it back onto the wreckage of the collapsed crane. He slowly turned around, finding an astonished and concerned Tali behind him. As he looked at her, and she looked back, his own legs simply gave out on him, and he fell, seated onto the floor.

She immediately rushed to him, kneeling by his side, as she softly laid her hands around his face. "Are you alrightâ€|?" She beckoned in a tender, worried tone, as she gently stroked his brow - caressing it, and wiping the sweat away, at the same time.

"Taliâ€|" He began, with a slow, exhausted shake of his head, as he tried to catch his breath. "I completely agree with youâ€|"

"Agree with me...? What do you meanâ€|?"

"From now onâ€|" He continued. "I don't care if we go out for dinner, dancing, and a showâ€| Our armor and weapons come with usâ€|!"

"Hmhmhmhmâ€|" Tali giggled, wrapping her arms around him, as she leaned over, pressing her faceplate's forehead, against his,

"I never realized before how hard these god damn things are to kill when you don't have the right equipmentâ€|" John elaborated - pointing a thumb over his shoulder at the inert mech standing directly behind him, as his breathing slowly returned to a regular pace.

"Well, I'm surprised you were able to take it down, the way you didâ€|" An audio sensor heard a female quarian say. "These things are usually built to be resistant to power surges, in case of things like shock mines and pulse grenades."

As the two exhausted combatants took a moment to rest, by each other's side, the faintest flicker of light pulsated within the downed YMIR's two optic sensors.

CATASTROPHIC SYSTEM FAILURE

PRIMARY POWER SOURCE OFFLINE

REROUTING TO AUXILIARY POWER

REBOOT IN PROGRESS...

[STATUS CHECK]

UNIT INTEGRITY: 38%

PRIMARY WEAPON SYSTEM: OFFLINE

SECONDARY WEAPON SYSTEM: OFFLINE

UNARMED COMBAT PROTOCOLS INITIATED

REBOOT COMPLETE

The glow in the mech's optics gradually grew from a faint, dying flicker back to a bright, blood red luminescence.

"We better go see if Matty's okay!" Tali insisted, as she suddenly remembered, and stood back up. "Poor little kresha must be scared to death!"

John nodded. He grunted under his breath a little, as he pushed himself off the floor. And the moment he staggered to his feet, he was stunned to hear the unexpected grinding of metal, screech out from behind him.

"Huh?!" He exclaimed, in shock, as he swung himself around, only to be met with the sight of a huge, titanium plated forearm swinging at his face. John Shepard's reflexes may be second to none, but even he wasn't fast enough to completely avoid the blow. As he saw the swing coming, he tried to sidestep it, successfully dodging the blunt of the robotic arm. But it still managed to graze him with enough force to spin him around, and send him tumbling to the floor.

"John!" Tali cried out, as she watched the metal behemoth raise its damaged right leg, intent on stomping the life force out of Shepard. Tali grabbed at his arm, and him yanked aside, the split second before the hulking mech could slam its leg down. POW! Its powerful stomp resonated with a thud - but with its leg severely damaged, it also caused the mech to stumble a bit, and nearly lose its equilibrium.

"Uggghhh!" Shepard groaned in a groggy daze - clinging to consciousness, with a bleeding gash now on his forehead, as Tali dragged him away. After a suitable distance, she let him go - leaving him laying safely in the front, right corner of the cargo bay, under a wall-mounted, metal tool cabinet. She then stood up and looked over at the mech, with a vicious rage in her eyes.

"Alright, you bosh'tet!" Tali snarled through her teeth - clenching her fists into wrecking balls, as the mangled mech finished correcting itself. "Now you deal with me!"

The petite framed quarian machinist charged headlong into danger, straight at the YMIR. When its sensor's saw her coming, it immediately zeroed in, and raised its only arm high above its head. When she came into range, the mech let it drop, like a two ton fist swatting at a fly. POW! Tali broke left, avoiding the giant arm that managed to strike nothing but the floor, leaving a dented crater in the process. She scrambled to her feet, and as she saw the colossus raising its arm back up, no doubt to ready another attack, she leapt at it, and latched on. As the YMIR lifted its arm, Tali pulled herself up, and used the moving limb as a springboard, to hurl

herself onto the behemoth's back.

"Ughhâ€|" John grunted in a creaky, pained voice, as he sat up with his eyes clenched shut, and his hand clutching his forehead wound. The pounding of metal and the sound of frenzied mechanical whirrs coaxed his eyes open. And what he saw, he could not believe. There, in the center of the room, the titanium titan flailed and spun about in a feverish attempt to fling it's rider off. Tali clung on for dear life - her legs swinging around in the wind, as she held on to the YMIR's neck with one hand, while reaching into the hole at the back of the its 'skull' with the other.

"Tali!" He cried out, as a scared, sinking feeling settled into the pit his stomach. Somehow, the indomitable machine's thrashing had grown even more desperate and violent than when he straddled it. Perhaps a result of sensing its impending demise.

It stomped about the room, kicking around crates, and debris, as it unknowingly began to creep its way towards the port side window. Tali sifted around in the mech's head with her fingers until, at long last, she found what she searching for. She ground her teeth, as she clung on, and with one, hard yank-!

The mech stopped cold in it's tracks, standing inches away from the port side window, facing out at the streaks of blue and white, as the fearsome red glow in it's optic sensors, and all it's systems, damaged or intact, went out once and for all...

Seeing this, John exhaled a long, drawn out sigh of relief, as he draped a trembling hand over his face, and gulped at the bile that had formed in his throat.

Tali took a brief glimpse at the blue circuit board in her hand, as she hung off the lifeless mech's back. Seeing no use for it, she simply tossed it aside, and prepared to jump off. That's when, as if exacting one final act of aggression, the inactive mech began to creak, and ever so slowly lean forward, towards the window.

"Oh noâ€|" Tali exclaimed to herself, as she quickly reclined back, using all her weight to try and rebalance the falling YMIR, as if she were tugging on the reins of a horse.

The odd creaking sound forced Shepard to draw his hand away from his eyes. As he looked up, he was suddenly stunned to find the mechanical menace falling over, with Tali still on it's back. Despite her struggle, it was far too heavy, and as it toppled, like a chopped down redwood, it was taking her with it.

At the last moment, Tali turned and sprang off of the inert monstrosity. The clamor of shattering glass tore through the room when the massive mech crashed through the window pane, as if it were made of plastic wrap. The mangled machine was immediately sucked out into the vacuum, and utterly obliterated upon passing out of the ship's mass effect FTL envelope. The torrential winds were kicked up, as the oxygen began getting sucked out into space, taking everything that wasn't bolted down with it. Tali clawed at the floor, as she felt her body get lifted and pulled. Suddenly, her fingers grabbed onto the only thing they could - a small latch belonging to a square maintenance panel door, in the floor. John clung on to a steel support beam, near the edge of the wall, as the tempest howl lifted

him, and whipped him around.

As the two fought against the gale-force current trying to suck them out into the void, the scattered crates and debris in the room were snatched out through the window - inhaled by the abyss with incredible velocity. And back inside the Carmenta Illustria's loading bay, a scared little boy peered expectantly through an aqua-pod window, when suddenly, the small cutout opening began to funnel in the air, like an unseen god taking a deep breath. Surf boards, and scuba tanks, and other loose, recreational equipment was immediately sucked out through the small passageway. And even a few of the heavy, submersible pods, including the one Matty was currently in, slowly began to get pulled, and dragged across the floor, leaving black, rubber skid-marks on the ground, from the braked tires of their trailers.

Shepard wrenched his arms around the beam, as his body was pulled parallel to the floor, in the tempest. He looked back at Tali, who wrestled with all her might to keep her grip on the tiny latch. Suddenly, the lock snapped, and the panel door flew open!

"Tali!" John screamed, when he saw her get whipped back, a few inches closer to the gaping, inhaling, window. Luckily, she hadn't lost her grip, and the panel remained attached to the floor. But by the look of the two tiny, flimsy hinges holding it in place, this wouldn't be the case for long.

"I'm sorry, John!" She shouted in a trembling, apologetic voice - as she found herself at a complete loss for what to do. "Whatever happens I'll always love you!"

"Don't talk like that, Tali! Just hold on!" Shepard begged, as he took a frantic look around, desperately hoping to devise some way of reaching her, and pulling her away from the jaws of death. "I'm coming, just hold on!"

"Please, not like this!" His thoughts echoed, crying out in his own mind. Despite the howl in his ears and the hurricane winds blasting past him, at that moment, time seemed to stand still. John could hear the rapid pulse of his heart, and feel it racing inside his chest, as his vision became alive with flashing memories of the past. He saw her there, in the Collector base, sliding down, down, down across the platform, as the human-reaper larva burst into a ball of fire, below. And he saw himself throwing himself after her - desperately reaching out for her hand, and scared to death that he'd never hold it again. But at the last possible second, he caught her. He then saw her, there inside the crumbling, searing red vortigaunt control room, with her arms wrapped around him, and her head buried into his shoulders, as they awaited death or deliverance together.

And finally, he saw what he saw on the day when the Reapers, at long last, fell defeated... He saw himself on bended knee, sliding the ring he still carried in his pocket, onto her finger. He saw a lifetime of love, devotion, and happiness, together. He saw the future that they so desperately fought for together. And as he watched it all slipping away, he was suddenly overcome by a real, unfathomable sensation of terror, he had never known before. When his mind snapped back to the reality of the harrowing predicament, he knew he had to do something. But he couldn't just dive after her again, like he had before. And it wouldn't be long before every last

cubic meter of air was drained out into the void, leaving them to succumb to the effects of the vacuum.

Just then, much like the panel door currently supporting Tali, the lock on the wall-mounted tool cabinet above him snapped in twain, and the door flew open. It flapped in the howling wind, as a plethora of tools and supplies were sucked out of the cabinet, like confetti, into the abyss. And the last thing to go was a long, thick looking, industrial rope, neatly coiled, and bound in the shape of a figure 8. Just as it was sucked out of the compartment, a few of it's fibers were miraculously snagged by the sharp, jagged corner of the cabinet door.

Shepard looked up at the whisking rope, with a wide-eyed gaze. Knowing it could go at any second, he wasted no time, and began shimmying his way vertically up the beam, towards the cabinet, as if he were hanging off a ledge. The rope flapped flaccidly in the breeze, like a flag whipping around on a windy day. But before he could reach it, it suddenly slipped off of the corner, and hurtled straight towards the window. In a panic, John lunged up, nearly losing his grip on the beam, as he swung his leg out towards it. By some miracle, he managed to get the rope loop to hook around the tip of his scuffed up, left dress shoe. Letting one hand go from the beam, and carefully raising his leg at the same time, he reached out and slid the rope off his shoe, granting him license to breath a tiny sigh of relief. He brought the rope up to his mouth and bit down. Utilizing his teeth as a second hand, he unraveled the neatly coiled line, and began wrapping it around the steel support beam. After a few short seconds, and a quick bowline knot later, he gave the rope one good, stiff tug, as a test of it's strength, before simply letting go of the beam all together, and sliding horizontally across the rope, towards Tali. In his haste, he never noticed the sloppily made knot slowly coming undone.

Oxygen continued to escape through the shattered window, like a high-powered wind tunnel. The howling suction whipped the panel door supporting Tali up and down, as she watched John practically fly along the rope line, towards her, as if it were a firehouse pole. At that moment, one of the hinges on the panel snapped free, jerking the door further out, and leaving her dangling precariously by only one, half-inch aluminum hinge.

"Tali!" She heard John yell out, as he solidified his grasp on the line to stop himself, and stretched his arm over to her. "Give me your hand!"

She released the grip on the door latch with her right hand, and turned back to extend it out towards Shepard, behind her. As the furious depressurization continued, whipping them both about, their fingers only managed to graze by each other, as they tried to take hold of one another's hand. The tiny bolts in the aluminum hinge slowly began to pry off, as she reached with an outstretched arm. Suddenly, the hinge snapped off! John lunged for Tali, grabbing her by the wrist as she flew by, just as the panel door tumbled out of the window. His fatigued arm pulled her up, and she took a firm hold, both of him, and the rope line.

"We have to close the emergency shutters!" She shouted over the deafening howl, as she pointed up at a small button panel on the wall, beside the window. John nodded, and they both began pulling

themselves along the rope, hand over hand, towards the button. When they pulled up beside the button panel, the Commander reached for it - outstretching his arm as far as it would go. But his reach was a few feet too short.

"Hang on!" He urged, with a shout.

Tali nodded, and fortified her grip around the line. With time and oxygen rapidly running out, Shepard began to rock himself back and forth, inching himself a little closer to the button with every swing. But, as the rope line swayed like a pendulum, the slipshod knot tied around the steel support beam continued to loosen.

With his last swing, the tips of John's fingers could almost brush against the surface of the mocking, red button. But it was clear he was never gonna reach it like this. Unlessâ€¦|

"Tali, give me your gun!" He shouted, as he retracted his arm.

Tali quickly complied, letting go of the rope with one hand, and reaching down into her holster to retrieve the standard issue security handgun. She brought it up and handed it to John. As he took it, he wrapped his hand around the stock, allowing it to fully extend in his grip. He quickly held it out sideways, aimed straight towards the button. His grip around the rope tightened again, as he started to rock back and forth once more - each oscillation forcing the knot to ebb further and further. He threw his armed limbed forward as hard as he could, just grazing the silver panel around the button, but not actually successful in hitting it. With a determined look glaring in his eyes, he swung back with all his might, and lunged forward, with a forceful thrust. As the tip of the gunbarrel careened, deadcenter, with the large, red button, the knot around the support beam whipped loose, and flew free.

The once rigid line fell slack. Nearly in unison, John and Tali clenched their eyes, and wrapped their arms tightly around one another - holding their breaths, as they were pulled towards the gaping window to the dark abyss. At the same time, a solid, metal plated shield swiftly sliced down from the ceiling, in front of the breach, like the blade on a guillotine. The instant before they could reach the window, the shutter slammed down, bringing an abrupt end to the suction, and causing the embraced couple to plow against it, from their own inertia, and plop down to the floor, still in eachothers arms.

John and Tali panted frantically on the floor - their chests contracting and expanding with each rapid breath, as they continued to squeeze and hold on to one another, partly to reassure themselves that they were still alive.

"Oh, thank the ancestorsâ€¦|!" Tali said with a sigh, in a shaky, but greatly relieved voice, as she slowly rolled to the side, off of Shepard, and put a hand over her chest, to try and calm herself down.

With his heart still racing in his own chest, John couldn't help himself from letting out a few exhausted chuckles, under his breath. As he laid there, he raised the security pistol still clutched in his right hand, and held it up, in front of his face.

"Wellâ€¦" He said, sounding completely out of breath, as he looked at the simple, silver handgun. "'Least it was good for somethingâ€¦"

21. Chapter 21: Hell Hath No Fury

****Salvation: Episode I - The Taking of the Carmenta
Illustria****

Disclaimer: This fan-fiction is part of an episodic series taking place after Salvation: A Half-Life/Mass Effect Universe Fan Fiction, which will lead directly to its sequel, Salvation II: Project Prometheus. These episodes and sequel take place OUTSIDE of the Mass Effect 3 continuity. Characters property of their respective companies, Half-Life created by Valve and Mass Effect created by Bioware.

****Chapter 21: Hell Hath No Fury****

"Tali, are you hurtâ€¦?!" John pressingly beseeched, with a profound sense of angst and distress in his voice, as he immediately sat up, off the floor, and leaned over Tali, rapidly looking over her helmet and suit for visible ruptures. "Is anything broken?! Did you damage your suit?!"

"No, no, don't worry... I'm okay, John." She happily assured, with a pant and a mild titter, trying to reassure him, while still in the process of catching her own breath, as she laid her palm flat against the center of his chest â€" feeling his heart thundering inside. "I'm not hurt, and my suit would've alerted me if there were a breach. I'm alrightâ€¦ Thanks to youâ€¦"

"Thank godâ€¦" Shepard expressed with a deep, grateful sigh, allowing his head to hang down, over his chest, in relief. "Now what the hell were you thinking?!" He then admonished, as he raised his head back up, and looked at her. His disapproving gaze and his cross tone were not all that dissimilar from those of a worried parent scolding a mischievous child for doing something dangerous.

Tali's eyes widened with surprise, and then narrowed with bewilderment, as she slowly sat up. "John, I-"

"Don't you ever do anything that stupid again, do you hear me?!" He chided again, abruptly cutting her off.

"Sâ€¦ Stupid?!" Tali retorted with a wide-eyed stutter, rapidly growing irate, as she popped up to her feet, and looked down at Shepard. "Well, excuse meâ€¦! What? You think I KNEW the thing was gonna topple through the window like that?!" She rebutted, offended, with one hand pointed to her chest, and the other pointed towards the blown out, shutter sealed window.

"I'm not talking about it falling overâ€¦!" The Commander asserted, as he rose to his feet beside her - struggling a bit from his still injured leg. "I'm talking about how you recklessly climbed onto that thing's back the way you did. You could've been killed!"

"â€¦U-unless I'm mistaken, John-" Tali cstammered to response, as she

tried to give herself a moment to relax, and understand. "-you had just done the exact same thing not ten minutes earlier!"

"Yeah, but I'm not the one who can die from a ruptured suit, or a cracked visor, Tali!" Shepard proceeded to lecture, trying to mask the sounds of worry in his voice with an authoritative tone. "It's my job to take the risks, alright? Not yours!"

Tali scoffed and widened her eyes in disbelief. "Since when?!" She demanded. "John, ever since I've known you, hardly a day has gone by that we don't stare death in the eye, slap it across the face, and say 'come and get us, you bosh'tet'!"

"Yeah, well not anymore!" The troubled Commander conclusively asserted, as he crossed his arms, and looked away.

"John, I've never seen you like this before!" Tali uttered in a soft, tender, and baffled voice, as she approached him, and gently laid her right hand over his left shoulder. "What's wrong? Why are you acting thi-"

"Listen!" Shepard abruptly blurted out, as he spun himself around to face her, before she could finish, causing her to timorously pull her hand back. "I just don't want you taking another stupid risk like that again, okay?!"

"John, I!"

"Is that UNDERSTOOD?!"

Tali's eyes blinked rapidly at his sudden, uncharacteristic, and far from expected, outburst. Under her violet mask, her expression quickly took a semblance of sorrow, confusion, distress, and shock, as her luminous eyes seemed to waver. But it didn't take long for that amalgam of emotion to be replaced by a fuming, scornful grimace. She clenched her eyes shut, swallowing back any stray tears that may have exuded to the surface, before they could escape.

"Yes sir, Commander Shepard, sir!" She sarcastically retorted, through gritted teeth, and a raging voice, as she looked back up to face the Navy man - immediately standing at attention, and presenting him with a stern, disciplined salute. "I apologize for my insubordination! Sir. I didn't realize you were issuing a direct order! SIR!"

Shepard cringed and groaned all at once, as he watched Tali put on the angry facade of a hardened, steadfast soldier. He draped his hand over his eyes, and dragged it down across his face, stretching his cheeks out as he did so, when he suddenly realized how boorish the words spewing from his mouth must've sounded.

"Tali, look!" He began again, with his arms apologetically outstretched. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it to come out like that... I-I'm only trying-"

"IF I may be excused! COMMANDER!" The indignant quarian erupted, cutting Shepard off, as she held her head upturned, in a disciplined, dignified, and haughty manner. "I have to get back to a little boy, who's probably scared to death right now, and make sure he's alright! SIR!"

Tali flashed a militaristic salute, and then waved her hand dismissively in Shepard's face, before brushing past him, and storming away, towards the umbilical entrance leading back to the luxury cruise liner, in a huff.

"Argh, Tali!" John expelled a creaky, dejected groan, as he hung his head back, slumped his shoulders, and turned to give chase.

"Tali, come on!" His persistent voice echoed off the walls of the narrow, turbulent corridor, as he caught up to the scornful quarian. "I wasn't trying to offend you!"

"Well you could've fooled me!" She reproached, as she suddenly stopped and observed the now plugged-up entrance to the Carmenta Illustria.

The cutout passageway that had initially offered the thieving hijackers admission to the grand, luxury liner was now completely blocked and congested with a heaping stopple of recreational supplies, equipment, and clutter from the Illustria's loading bay. It accumulated here, into a piled mess, like a clog in a sink, after the cutout hole proved too narrow to allow it all through at once, during the sudden depressurization.

"Oh no!" Tali sighed, in worry and distress, as she rushed ahead towards the blockage. "Keelah, let him be okay!"

Her first instinct was to merely push her way through, by force. But this idea was quickly slain when the clutter proved too stubborn to allow her headway. Despite their quibble, John immediately joined her, and began trying to shove and plow his own way in. But in spite of his greater strength, he had no better luck. With no other option, they both rapidly began yanking, and jerking at the objects in their way. The largest, and most stubborn obstruction, was an inverted jet-ski that had gotten lodged in the center of the recreational refuse. But one by one, surf boards, and scuba tanks, life jackets, and hover boards began to topple, and shift.

Together, they fervently labored at clearing the congestion. And for the time being, Tali did her best to keep her scornful, bereft eyes upturned, and averted from Shepard's. But a singular, fleeting glance, in his direction, was all it took for her to notice the newly opened gash exuding a thin trickle of blood down his right temple. The ire in her eyes instantaneously faded into compassion and care, and her cold silence was broken.

"Are you alright?" She reluctantly asked - trying to mask her concern with an austere tone, as they continued to work.

Shepard raised a perplexed eyebrow, as he looked up towards her. "Yeah, fine. Why?"

"You're hurt." The lavender lady elaborated, as she continued to dig through the refuse. "You're bleeding from where the mech struck your head. I just want to make sure you're alright."

John's eyes narrowed, as he quickly touched the tips of his fingers to his right temple. Only now, as he pulled his crimson coated

fingers away, and looked down at his own wet blood, did he realize that his head was throbbing, and his wounds were stinging.

"Hmphâ€|" He muttered apathetically, as he wiped what blood he could off his fingers, on the side of his jet black pants. "It's nothing, don't worry. Might be just a few split stitches. I've had plenty worse."

"Well, good!" She abruptly snapped, as she turned her full attention back towards clearing away the clutter. "Fine. I WON'T worry then!"

"Uhmâ€|" John recoiled a bit, as he continued to help her. A small opening had been cleared away now, providing a modest window into the Illustria's massive loading bay, but it was still too small to fit through. They both continued to push and pull at the clutter, slowly widening the gap. But Tali's motions were much faster now - torrid, and feverish, even violent - fueled by anger or resentment, or both...

"Wellâ€| Actuallyâ€|" John spoke up again, feigning an overly dependent, faint-hearted tone of voice, as he drew one hand over his forehead, and pretended to reel in pain, a bit. "Now that I think about it, it does hurt pretty badâ€| Could be seriousâ€| It might be concussedâ€|"

"Oh no, like you said, you're fineâ€|" Tali affirmed with an angry cynicism, as the large jet ski toppled over, and the last of the remaining debris began to shift, and collapse, finally leaving a path wide enough to pass through. "That hard head of yours must come in handy." She chided, as she made her way in, kicking away at the last few scattered items left on the ground. John simply let out an aggravated groan and a grumble, as he quickly followed along.

When they stepped back into the Carmenta Illustria's spacious loading bay, it was indeed in a state of disarray, but not nearly as bad as one might imagine. Most of the stuff that wasn't bolted down had gotten sucked straight into the umbilical passageway, due to the violent, but momentary hull breach on the smaller, neighboring cargo ship. But everything else was more or less just as they had left it. Many of the large trailers, on which the multiple aqua-pods were mounted, had shifted a bit, but most of them had only managed to move a few feet from where they were. And only one of them, the one closest to the door, had been pulled over, and knocked onto its side.

Tali breathed a deep sigh of relief, as she saw this - but she was still afraid for the young boy's safety.

"Which one was he in?" John pressingly asked, as his eyes scanned the various aqua-pods for movement.

"I don't remember which one exactly, but it was down this way!" She affirmed, with certainty, as she took off down an aisle between the aqua-pods on the left hand side, with Shepard in tow. A few yards down, her speedy sprint slowed to a jog, as she peered into the large windows of each individual submersible, trying to detect movement.

"I think it was this oneâ€|" The restless quarian presumed, as she

took off towards one of pod's doors.

As she dashed over and tore open the door, a subtle movement in the corner of Shepard's eye caught his attention. He turned to his right, and looked up towards a neighboring aqua-pod, where he could've sworn he had seen something moving in the window, but there was nothing there to speak of. That is, until he saw it again. It was only for a split second, but a little head suddenly bounced up, inside the submersible, before dropping out of sight again and again, within the seafaring vehicle.

"Tali, he's over here!" John quickly called out, as he rushed ahead towards the adjacent aqua-pod, with a relieved grin on his face.

Upon hearing, the lavender masked quarian swiftly hopped out of the vacant pod she was in, after finding this one devoid of the child she sought. Shepard rushed to the hatch door of the next pod over, and pulled on the latch, causing it to swing downward, and form a small flight of stairs, as it opened.

"You're back!" Matty abruptly shouted, with a wide-eyed glee, as he unexpectedly sprang out of the darkened pod interior, and leapt into Shepard's arms.

"Whoa! H-hey!" Shepard chuckled with a mixture of surprise and contentment, when he caught the little human boy, who latched onto him in turn. "Of course we're back!" He reassured, with an ample smile, and traces of laughter still lingering in his voice, as he lightly patted the boy's back, and lightly set him down. "I told you we'd come back for you. We wouldn't leave our brave little trooper behind."

"Oh kresha, are you alright?!" Tali immediately beseeched, as she rushed in and crouched down before the little boy - placing her hands on his shoulders, and running them down the length of his arms, as she searched for wounds or other signs of injury.

"Tali!" Matty jubilantly exclaimed upon seeing her, as he lunged towards her, with childlike spontaneity, and his arms wide open, for a hug.

"Oh, thank the ancestors!" Tali expressed, with a profound sigh of relief, as she returned his tight, affectionate embrace. "I'm so glad you're safe!"

"I-I didn't leave the thing!" Matty declared, with an over excited stutter, and a rapid shake of his head, as he pulled away from Tali, and pointed a thumb over his shoulder, towards the aqua-pod. "You told me to promise to stay here, no matter what, and I did! I did! Even when everything started flying away, and getting all whish and whoosh and whew-wheew-!" He proclaimed in a very animated, excited state, as he swirled his hands about, frantically, to accompany the howling, swishing sound effects he was emulating with his mouth. "-I didn't move, I stayed right here!"

"I know. I know you did." Tali lauded, with a proud smile under her mask, and a grateful nod. "And I'm very, very proud of you."

"You did a great job, buddy." The Commander supplemented, from his

place, standing beside Tali, as he gently laid his hand upon the boy's shoulder, in a congratulatory manner, causing Matty's face to beam with delight. "We're both very proud of you!"

"Right then!" He then continued, stoically standing up straight, and placing his arms akimbo on his hips, as he took a brief glance around the newly haphazard loading bay. In the meantime, Tali had already taken the small boy by the hand, and prepared to move. "We really need to get that call out now. We should probably-"

"Okay, come on, little kresha. With me." Tali abruptly urged - completely ignoring John, and leaving him behind to talk to himself, as she headed back to the smaller, adjoined vessel, with a turn of her icy shoulder.

"-head back" to the cargo ship "Argh!" Shepard finished his sentence with an aggravated noise, which was something between a grunt and a sigh, as he promptly turned to follow - rolling his eyes, and shaking his head as he did so.

"Are" Are we going back into that smelly place?" Matty entreated, in a timid little voice that started to quiver. "What about that big monster? Is it gonna get us?"

"No, no, don't worry about that thing anymore, little one." Tali softly assured, as she stopped and hunched down towards Matty. "We took care of it. It can't hurt you anymore. Don't be afraid!"

"That's right." John cheerfully contributed, once he caught up. "That thing won't be bothering anyone anymore. Tali sent that big hunk a' scrap hurling straight out into space, heh!" He declared with a chuckle, as Tali stood back up and glared a hole straight through him.

"Yes!" She began, with a tinge of anger and a hint of sarcasm. "Which, as I recall, was a rather stupid thing to do just then, wasn't it Commander?"

"Ugh" Tali, listen" I didn't mean-"

"Come on, Matty, umph!" Tali said, with a heaving grunt, as she scooped the child up, into her arms, and continued on - once again leaving Shepard behind to speak to himself. "Ooh, you're a big boy."

"Tali!" John called out, beseechingly, as he trailed along behind her. "Tali, hang on. Would you just slow down for a second?" Tali!"

"Uh" I think he's calling you!" Matty informed, in a somewhat bashful tone, as he sat perched in Tali's arms, looking over her shoulder, at the perturbed Commander following along behind them.

"Oh, he's fine." The scorned quarian assured, without stopping, as they breezed past the jumbled rows of aqua-pods. "Don't listen to him."

"Tali, this is hardly the time or the place for this!" Shepard

adamantly proclaimed, in a voice that was slowly growing from apologetic to irate. "You're completely overreacting, you know that?!"

"Oh, I'M the one that's overreacting?!" Tali chidingly adjured, as she stopped and turned to him with an angry leer. "Well, I wasn't the one that decided to launch operation 'blow things out of proportion' now, was I?!" With that, she immediately spun back around, and pressed forward, as Matty looked on, at the couple, with a countenance of worry and confusion on his face.

"How am I blowing this out of proportion?!" John entreated, taking a quick, but concise, three-hundred and sixty degree spin beside her, for a glance around the large loading bay, to make sure they were still alone, and not being followed or watched.

"Look, maybe I was a bit out of line earlierâ€¦" He said, leaning in closer, and lowering his voice to a tone just above a whisper.

"Oh, just 'a bit'?" Tali scoffed, with a roll of her luminous eyes.

"But the truth is; you could've gotten yourself killedâ€¦!"

The livid quarian stopped dead in her tracks, with Matty in her arms. She leaned over towards John, lowering her voice down to a similar level, in an effort to keep their squabble away from curious little ears.

"John, how is that different from what I've been doing every day since joining your crew?" She beseeched, in a hushed voice, close to his ear. "How is it different from what WE'VE been doing since the day we met, and the very first time we ever heard the word 'Reapers' uttered?"

Shepard thought about it for a moment - his mouth cracked open, and his eyes flickering like a dying candle. He knew she was right, but something had changed now. There was something newâ€¦ Something deep down insideâ€¦ Something that he couldn't come to grips withâ€¦

"B-because, ifâ€¦" He began again, struggling to answer with an uncharacteristically halting voice. "I mean, if you were toâ€¦ I-I just couldn'tâ€¦" After a moment of fumbling with his words - a fairly novel sensation for him - he simply stopped, sighed with his eyes shut, and pointedly proclaimed. "It's just different now, alright?"

"How?!"

"It just is!" He reaffirmed, as a worried Matty looked on - his pupils bouncing back and forth between the bickering lovers, like a shuttlecock over a net. "I'll be the one to take the risks, Tali! Not you!"

"Oohâ€¦!" Tali suddenly exclaimed, sarcastically exaggerating the tone of someone who's just come to a great realization, with a few slow motion nods of her head. "Oh, I get it nowâ€¦! So it's okay for YOU to go off and do those big dangerous things you do, because YOU'RE the great 'Commander Shepard'. Can't have somebody else

stealing your thunder now, can we John? Oh, I mean, 'Commander', sirâ€|"

"Ughâ€|" Shepard groaned, and let his head slouch back. "Tali, no. That's not what I mea-

"No, noâ€|" Tali quickly refuted, abruptly cutting him off, with a raised hand. "Like I said, I get itâ€| Of all the male chauvinistic..." She sneered, and spun herself back around without finishing - giving Shepard her back, and her icy cold shoulder once more, as she continued on towards the cutout hole in the loading bay door, surrounded by scattered debris.

"This isn't male chauvinism!" John protested, as he hurriedly gave the loading bay another flyby glance around for possible interlopers.

"Uhmâ€| Are you two arguingâ€|?" Matty's timid voice finally begged the question, as he sat on Tali's arm, with his own hooked around her shoulders.

"Yes!" "No..." Tali emphatically affirmed, and John modestly denied, in near perfect unison.

"â€|Well, I'M not arguing, anyway." Shepard added, with a nonchalant shrug of his shoulders and a shake of his head, as he kept up behind the quarian.

"Oh, so I'm the one that's doing all the arguing!?" Tali bitterly demanded, as the trio reached the hole leading to the neighboring ship.

"Hey, if you say soâ€|" John replied, with a tinge of arrogance, as he put his hands up, to absolve himself of fault.

The fuming quarian turned to him, and let forth a throaty groan, under her breath. "Ooh, you, youâ€|! I'm not speaking to you anymoreâ€|! SIR!" She asserted, as she turned back, and began to maneuver herself into the narrow hole, while minding her footing over the scattered refuse. And just then, as John began to follow her in, she swung back around, pointed a finger in his face, and said. "And don't think I've forgotten about that 'quarian with a tummy ache' crack you made back on Tuchanka, either!"

"This again?!"

* * *

><p>Leahr'Haan's burgundy faceplate was painted in the brightly lit reflection of the letters, symbols, and syntax flashing on the screen before him, as his fingers whisked around on a holographic keyboard. His pace was frantic, and he teetered off the very edge of his seat. But he seemed to be working with a teeming excitement, rather than an abject panic.<p>

"Don't you have our surveillance system back online YET?!" Andrew Kim snapped, as he came to stand behind the working quarian, with both arms crossed - joining the stout volus in the Captain's cap already standing there.

"Not yet, but it won't be long now!" He enthusiastically decreed, as his finger motions grew even faster.

"So you CAN fix it, then?" Tarrik asked, in a skeptic tone that concealed a small spur of optimism.

"I'm about to!" Leahr asserted, with an adamant nod, and a voice on the brink of madness, as he continued to punch away at the keys. "Whoever did this is good. VERY good. But I'm better! Oh yes! They've thought of everything else! Everything! But I guarantee you they didn't think of this! They couldn't have! There's just no way!"

"What is it that you're doing?" Tarrik beckoned.

"I'm writing a virus!"

"A what?!"

"A computer virus!" Leahr elaborated, in response to Tarrik's outburst, as Kim raised a vexed eyebrow. "I'm gonna bring the whole network down!"

"What?!" The one-eyed Commander snapped, as he uncrossed his arms, and clenched his hands into fists. "What the hell for?! I told you I wanted you to restore control over the surveillance feeds. I didn't say I wanted you to kill the whole damn system!"

"No, no, you don't understand. This is brilliant!" The quarian techie assured, stopping his work just for a moment, as he glanced back over his shoulder. "See, as soon as I infect the network, the system's anti-virus protocols will kick in." He started to explain, while going back to his keystrokes. "As a safeguard, the whole system will go into standby mode. It'll lock out all unrecognized connections, and scrub the drives in order to purge the infection. Once that's done, the whole system will reboot itself. And it'll reset to all the default configurations. Meaning-!" He paused expectantly, waiting for someone to conclude his sentence, which the volus did.

"Meaning we'd regain control over the surveillance feeds?" He conjectured, questioningly.

"Exactly!"

"Hmph!" Kim grunted, unimpressed. "Well, that all sounds well and good. But I'll hold my applause 'til I actually see our camera feeds back online. How much longer is it going to take you?"

"I'm just about to upload the virus now." Leahr declared, as his keystrokes drew to a halt. He then raised a single pointed finger, and slowly inched it towards the keyboard. "And here it goes!" Click.

The screen suddenly displayed a red progress bar, which filled up, like a shot, within the span of about three seconds. Just then, the entire display exploded into a burst of static, before dissipating and going completely blank.

"Perfect!" The burgundy veiled quarian exclaimed, as he leaned back into his chair, with his hands triumphantly clenched into fists.

"Next, the system will reboot itself, any second."

Just then, a voiceâ€¦ "Is that the best you can doâ€¦?"

"Huh?!" As Leahr shot forward, in surprise, the holographic screen lit up again with a flurry of snow and static. Gradually, the display started to clear up, and there, at the center of the static, appeared the visage of a rugged, broad shouldered man, donned in a short sleeved, System's Alliance Navy uniform.

"I delete viruses like that on the way to REAL errors." The figure asserted, with crossed arms, and a cocky sneer, to match his arrogant stance.

"It's him!" Kim shouted out, in shock, as he instinctively clenched his hands into tightly balled fists. "It's Shepard!"

"Shepard?!" Kargas' bellowing snarl resonated from the front of the bridge, as he turned away from the forward windows, which he had broodingly been peering out of, and bolted towards the back, where the other three stood convened.

"Where are you hiding at, Shepard?!" The one-eyed head of security demanded, as he pointed a rigid finger at the projection. "Afraid to show yourself, in person, you coward?!"

"There's nothing I'm afraid of!" The uniformed Navy Commander eagerly enthused, in a voice that sounded oddly high pitched, and a little off. "Except maybe the Reapers. Ever seen the size of one those things?"

"What?" Kim questioned, furrowing his brow, with a look of perplexity inherent in his eyes. "What are y-"

"Shepard!" Kargas bawled out, cutting Kim off, as he shoved his way through, like a snow plow, to come stand eye to eye with the man on the screen. He looked up at the uniformed soldier - eyes narrowed and teeth bared, like a rabid dog. "Listen, and listen well, you human piece of excrement! You're gonna pay for all you have done to my clan and my entire race!" He snarled in a rage, spitting out viscous globules of saliva through his sharp, gritted teeth, as the figure on the screen looked on indifferently. "I want you to take a good look at me, Shepard. Because I am Weyrloc Kargas! And I am the face of your death!"

"Good to meet you!" The projection jovially replied. "I'm Commander Shepard. Alliance Navy."

"You mock me?!" Kargas snapped - raising a fist, and shaking it at the screen. "You won't be so arrogant after I've-"

"Hey, whoa-whoaâ€¦" Kim stepped forward just then, interrupting the krogan, and trying to impede his raving rant. "Wait, hang on a secondâ€¦" He urged - putting a hand up, as he studied Shepard with a contemplative eye.

"What is it?! I am not about to just stand here, and allow this-"

"Would you just wait!?" Kim angrily snapped, cutting the irate krogan

off again. "Look!" He insisted, pointing his hands up at the screen. "Something's not right, here..."

Kargas turned back up towards the projection, and watched studiously. On the screen, Commander Shepard stood idly by, staring blankly into space, while occasionally bobbing back and forth, or swaying from side to side. Just then, he snapped his heels to attention, and randomly gave a disciplined, militaristic salute, before returning to his idle state.

"What are you doing?" Kargas queried, confoundedly.

Kim gave a slow, frustrated shake of his head. "It isn't him!" He supplemented, in response.

"What are you talking about?! Of course it's him. A mongrel vorcha could recognize him!"

"No, Commander Kim is correct!" Tarrik chimed in, with a wheeze from his respirator. "Look. Why would he be wearing an Alliance uniform here? And look at his face! No cuts... No bruises! I watched the broadcast of Shepard's speech on Earth, after the defeat of the Reapers. His face was bandaged and stitched up. No Kargas, my corpulent friend, I'm afraid we're staring at a V.I.."

"Impossible! It's just a trick!" Kargas roared, looking back up at the screen. "Shepard, you squalge's offspring, I thought you more man than this! Do you think, for one moment, that there is any hole on this ship you can crawl into, where I will not find you?!"

"Sorry, friend." Shepard blithely replied. "Can you run that one by me again? Try making your request a little more specific this time."

"What?" The seething krogan asked, angered and confused, as Kim casually stepped up beside him. "If it's specific you want, you putrid varren, then I demand that you reveal yourself, and face me in single combat, coward!"

"V.I." Kim suddenly addressed. "Identify yourself."

"Identification." The projection abruptly answered. "I am V.I. Model 1.7 AGB Commander Shepard, version 2.1.1."

"Cycle pre-installed V.I. skins." The foggy eyed Security Commander then mandated.

On his cue, the visage of the First Human Spectre on the screen suddenly faded into nothing, before reappearing a split second later - this time donned in a regal looking, navy blue and gold, Alliance Navy dress uniform, with the words "NAVY FORMAL" displayed across the bottom, in big, white letters. Just then, he faded again. When he reappeared, he was wearing a highly recognizable set of dark gray armor, with a red and white stripe running up his right arm, and an N7 insignia stamped on his chest. The words "N7 ARMOR" read across the bottom.

Kargas' brow furrowed in confusion, as he struggled to understand what was happening - watching Shepard suddenly take the semblance of

some sort of shape-shifting automaton. Meanwhile, Lehr'Haan simply sat there at the terminal, slouched down, with his shaking head disconsolately clutched between his hands.

At that moment, the facsimile on the screen reverted back to its original state - wearing a short sleeved, leather breasted, black, blue, and white Naval Uniform, marked with a System's Alliance insignia on the right chest - "NAVY CASUAL - DEFAULT".

"See?" Kim stated, with a casual shrug. "It's a fake."

Kargas was silent for a moment - his eyes narrowed with skepticism, as he stood looking up at the idle animations of the simulated reproduction of the Savior of the Citadel.

"Butâ€¦ How can this be?" He asked in a low, incredulous tone. "Every V.I. I've ever seen has always been so blatantly artificialâ€¦ This one has his faceâ€¦ The face of a man I've sworn to killâ€¦ And it speaks just like him."

"My personality matrix can predict what the REAL Commander Shepard would say with 7% accuracy."

"Mrrrâ€¦ Shut up!" Kargas snapped back at the imitation, with a fierce, gravelly growl.

"The son of a bitch is toying with usâ€¦" Kim declared, with a sigh and a scowl, as he turned and took a step away from the console.

"My krantt will still fi-"

"This model is currently running in demo mode." Shepard's visage enthusiastically interjected, unexpectedly cutting the increasingly riled krogan off. "If you would like to purchase the full version of this model, please see an authorized V.I. retailer."

"Shut up, I said!" Kargas bawled out again, furiously spewing saliva through the gaps between his tightly gritted, carnivorous teeth, as he spoke.

"Would you care to take a moment to register me? Registration is quick and ea-"

"RAAAAAARGH!" Before the static laced projection could finish, the Blood Pack leader flew into an unbridled berserker rage. He interlocked his fingers, claspng both hands together into one, mighty, sledgehammer-like fist, which he raised high above his head, and then proceeded to slam down onto the console, with the booming sound of a thunderclap.

Tarrik hastily backed away, and Lehr'Haan practically flew out of his seat, in a fright - trying to put as much distance between himself and the incensed krogan, who proceeded to pummel the sophisticated equipment to pieces. Repeatedly, he slammed his armored, volleyball sized fists down onto the terminal, denting and smashing it to bits - snarling, and roaring all the while. Sparks and debris gushed out, in all directions, as the corner terminal was reduced to little more than a huddled mass of dented panels, frayed wires, and demolished circuitry.

As his temper grew placid, and his body, fatigued, Kargas' frenzied strikes slowed to a stop. For a moment he stood there, panting heavily amidst the twisted, sparking remains of his own savagery. At that instant, as he hung his head down over his chest, he felt completely drained - not physically, but emotionally.

"Fear not, my Lukala!" He said, to himself, in a low, plaintive whisper. "I swear, on my soul, I will avenge you!"

"You know-" Commander Kim's snide, sarcastic voice chimed in, just then. "-you could've just asked me to switch it off!"

Kargas raised his head back up - his brow clenched in anger, and a livid scowl burning on his face, like a brand. Without a single word more, the apoplectic krogan turned to face the forward windows, and stormed back towards the front of the bridge - breezing past the fog-eyed Security Commander.

"Hmph!" Kim scoffed through his nostrils, with a dismissive shrug, as he watched the temperamental krogan go back to watching the stars, before turning his attention back towards the shaken up quarian.

"So..." The Commander began again, with a condescending tone, and a belittling gaze. "I take it your 'brilliant' virus idea didn't work, huh?"

"I-I- Uhm- W-well- N-no-" Leahr stammered, anxious and afraid, as the scrutinizing eyes of the human and volus in the room fell upon him. "It didn't- I-I-I mean- There's nothing more I can do!"

"Well you better get your ass moving and try something else. Use one of the other stations." Kim sternly ordered, waving his hand over the two rows of inert, vacated terminals on the bridge. "We still need those cameras back online."

"Y-you don't understand!" Leahr timorously began to explain, bowing his head, and rubbing his hands together anxiously, as if he were washing them. "I can't fix it! There's nothing I can do! Whoever did this is a lot smarter than I am- I- I-I'm not- I-I-I can't- I just-!" As he escalated to the brink of a panic attack, he stopped himself. Leahr closed his eyes, and exhaled a long, drawn-out, shaky sigh - trying to force his anxieties to conform into an uncompromising resolve. Just then, he stood up straight and looked dead-on into the brawny Commander's eyes. "It can't be fixed." He declared, trying to conceal a relentless terror behind his intrepid voice. "I'm sorry."

"Heh!" Kim chuckled snidely, under his breath, as he raised his eyebrows and cocked his head to the right, with a shrug. "You're sorry- Hmph- Yeah, well I'm sorry too!" He said, as he slowly drew his gleaming, silver handgun from his holster and raised it sideways, before his eyes - admiring it, as he rotated it around in front of his face. "I'm sorry that you've outlived your usefulness!"

"Have I?" Leahr rebutted, with a stoic tone, and a bolstered stance, causing the uniformed Commander to raise an eyebrow, and lower his brandished weapon, if only slightly.

"If you wanna kill me, go aheadâ€¦ Go ahead! Do it! I don't care anymore!" The quarian barked - showing little fear, despite being overwhelmed with an unfathomable terror, deep inside. "But I promise you, you'll never get this ship where you need it to go, without meâ€¦"

His curiosity enticed, Kim lowered his weapon completely, letting it hang freely, by his side. "Keep talkingâ€¦"

"â€¦My V.I. still has full control of the ship's other vital systems." Leahr elaborated. "And I'm the only one who knows how to work it. I'm the only one who knows how to plot our course, and program the relay coordinatesâ€¦ Without me, you'll never make it out of Citadel Spaceâ€¦"

Commander Kim sneered, with disdain, as he unwillingly accepted the quarian's statements as truth. "Hmphâ€¦ So, I see you've got a backbone buried somewhere in that suit, after allâ€¦" He scoffed, approaching the quarian, as he raised his weapon, and reattached it to his magnetic holster. "Fineâ€¦ I suppose I can overlook this little setback - what with my forgiving nature, and allâ€¦ But don't forget, you're in this just as deep as the rest of usâ€¦" He affirmed, with a stone-hard look in his eyes, as he stuck a rigid finger in Leahr's face. "You get us where we need to go, and when this is all over you'll walk away with your life and your share, just like we agreed. But try to pull somethingâ€¦ If you try to screw usâ€¦ I don't care if you are the one controlling the ship, I will kill you in a manner you can't even begin to imagineâ€¦ Do we understand each other?"

Leahr gulped. "â€¦What's not to understand?" He assured, in a voice wavering with the fear he was trying desperately to keep hidden.

With their dialogue complete, Commander Kim stepped aside, and tilted his head towards the front of the bridge, motioning for the fear-struck quarian to return to his place at the head console. Not hesitating, Leahr took a step around the one-eyed head of security, giving him a wide berth, as he rushed back towards the foremost station, and quickly sat down.

Immediately upon sitting, Leahr clutched at his chest - feeling his heart racing inside, as he breathed heavily, in and out, trying to calm down. "Oh ancestorsâ€¦" He whispered to himself, as he bowed his head, trying to normalize his rate of breathing. Just then, a red light, that had been flashing on the console, caught his attention. When he glanced up for a better look, he noticed that a red alert had been logged in the computer. With his agitated state gradually returning to normal, Leahr raised his hand, and clicked on the red, flashing button.

[ALERT LOG]

CONDITION RED - UNSCHEDULED DEPRESSURIZATION

|23:56:39|: OXYGEN BREECH DETECTED ON DECK 16 - LOADING BAY

|23:57:18|: OXYGEN BREECH SECURED ON DECK 16 - LOADING BAY

RED ALERT NULLIFIED - CONDITIONS OPTIMAL

As Leahr read the information that appeared on the screen, to himself, he suddenly realized that this was a likely indication into Shepard's possible location on the ship.

"Uhâ€| Hey, there's an uhmâ€| Uhâ€|" He ambivalently called out, raising his head, and turning it slightly, before stopping himself midsentence, and pondering for a moment.

The quarian's address fell on deaf ears as far as the krogan went, who merely stood peering listlessly out at the streaking lights outside. But Kim and Tarrik, who had since engaged in their own small conversation, turned to listen - waiting to hear what their so-called 'tech expert' was about to say.

"There's a what?!" Kim angrily demanded, after waiting a few seconds for something to follow.

"Uhâ€| No, nothingâ€|" Leahr assured, with an uneasy shake of his head. "Never mind. Sorryâ€|"

Kim scowled, and rolled his eyes, as he turned back down to the volus in the Captain's Cap, and continued his conversation. With them more or less occupied, Leahr hunkered down over console screen - trying to obscure what he was about to do, like a high school student trying to cover his test answers from cheating eyes. With a quick look back, over his shoulder, to make sure he wasn't being watched, Leahr moved his fingers towards a large red button on the console, and clicked itâ€|

[ALERT LOG SUCCESSFULLY CLEARED - ALL ENTRIES DELETED]

22. Chapter 22: The Children of Men

****Salvation: Episode I - The Taking of the Carmenta
Illustria****

Disclaimer: This fan-fiction is part of an episodic series taking place after Salvation: A Half-Life/Mass Effect Universe Fan Fiction, which will lead directly to its sequel, Salvation II: Project Prometheus. These episodes and sequel take place OUTSIDE of the Mass Effect 3 continuity. Characters property of their respective companies, Half-Life created by Valve and Mass Effect created by Bioware.

****Chapter 22: The Children of Men****

"My wordâ€|" Uttered the awestruck, fair-skinned, brunette beauty, who sat on the floor, besides Jacob, and an elite team of captives, enrobed in nothing but a tan sport coat, and a towel. "And you survived all of thatâ€|?"

Jacob responded by closing his eyes, raising his eyebrows, and giving a bit of a slow, cocky nod. A loud murmur teemed in the Promenade Deck now, as spirits grew restless, and the thousand-plus voices of the souls under duress blended together into a blaring, unintelligible, commotion. The fear and anxiety persisted in their

hearts, but much of the initial terror had abated. And numerous demands from the security force malefactors to "Shut up!" and "Keep quiet!" were shortly thereafter disregarded. Now, as a handcuffed turian sat at the head of the unruly crowd, regularly starring up at a large, illuminated, holographic clock, near the ceiling, he wondered to himself what had become of his friend, and Commander, and how much longer he could endure this excruciating wait, before his compulsion to take action would kick inâ€|

"Mr. Taylorâ€|" Vanessa Masters, the spirited, and rebellious young corporate executive began again, as she sat nestled close beside the former Cerberus Operative. "You have my deepest, and most profound admiration, and gratitude for all you have doneâ€|" She said in a demure tone, though her words resounded with sincerity. She cringed, just then, with a pained, sorrowful look overtaking her expression. "I can't imagine what hell it must've been for all of youâ€| Fighting against those ungodly, mechanized monstersâ€|" She offered sympathetically, as she laid a kindly hand upon his knee, and gently stroked it. "You are, undeniably, the epitome of valianceâ€|"

"Heh, well I wouldn't say all thatâ€|" Jacob replied, with a subtle smile - feigning a bashful reserve. "At least, not out loud, anywayâ€|"

The two laughed together and continued to converse - finding a blithe little brightness, in an otherwise bleak situation. Quite in fact, were it not for the tension and stiffness setting into his arms, and his back, from the prolonged period of time sitting in this unnatural, restrained position, Jacob would've long since forgotten that he was actually being held prisoner. Their whole time there together, his besotted eyes never drifted away from hers for more than a moment. Even wrapped in a bath towel, this raven haired enchantress could achieve a look of elegance, which made even the most chicly dressed aristocrat appear dowdy, by comparison.

"And I can't believe that nowâ€| after ALL thatâ€| THIS is what you get, as your rewardâ€|" Vanessa added, sighing and shaking her head with disgust, as her words grew louder and angrier, by the second. "All because a bunch of lousyâ€| greedyâ€| low-brow, bottom-feeding, FESTERING BALL OF LIZARD SLIME RENT-A-COPS-!" She took a breath. "-came up with a new 'get-rich-quick scheme'!"

Vanessa's raving, sputtering string of scornful insults managed to catch the attention of one of the said security officers, in particular. And as she sighed, and shook her head in frustration, she took a quick glance around the guarded deck. As her lilac colored eyes panned over towards the other hostages, she noticed the one handcuffed security officer sitting among them, reflecting a look of disapproval back at her.

"Yeah, that's right!" She asserted - eying Officer Zdrawkoh down, with an unforgiving glare. "I mean you too, gomer. A lot of this is your fault, you knowâ€|!"

"Mâ€| My fault?!" Zee snapped back, nearly choking on his own words, in surprise, as he swiveled around, on his rear, to face her. "How is this my fault?! I had nothing to do with this!"

"Oh, don't play so innocent...!" Vanessa chided, with a disparaging frown, as the developing spat quickly garnered the attention of the

nearby, handcuffed, onlookers - particularly Garrus and Jacob. "Another few weeks, and I'm sure you would've been looting this place dry right along with the rest of these reprobates!" She added. "And besides, I didn't exactly see you putting up a fight, Mr. Zed." "Zimbabwe! Whatever your name is..."

"Zed!"

"Whatever!"

"Listen, lady!" Zed retorted, with an austere tone, and a condescending roll of his eyes. "There're about eighty other guards on this ship! What the hell would you have had me do? Catch bullets with my mandibles?"

"Well, I don't know!" Vanessa replied, rolling her head around, in angry frustration. "You could've! You could've tried to keep a concealed weapon on you, or something!"

"And just where the hell would I have kept it?!"

"Use your imagination!" The fiery woman exclaimed. "All I'm saying is that thanks to you, and your goon squad friends, this fine, heroic Adonis-ngh! I-I-I mean, uh-" Vanessa stammered to a stop, embarrassingly retracting her words, as Jacob chuckled, and coyly grinned, behind her. "-I mean these! these fine, heroic, people! have to suffer through their vacation chained up as hostages!"

Zed sighed, as he bowed, and shook his head. "For spirits' sakes, lady! Gimme a break. Those guys are NOT my friends. Hell, this was only my first week on the job! They caught me off guard, and stripped me of my gear before I even knew what was happening. There's nothing I could've done!"

"No! No, I suppose you're right..." Vanessa concurred - sounding, for the moment, completely empathetic, as her tone and glare softened. A momentary regress! "Besides! It's not like you have the markings to even try! Do you, youngan?"

Zed couldn't help from gasping, as his eyes flew wide open at the brazen display of audacity by this woman.

"Ooh! Ouch!" Even Garrus cringed, and recoiled a bit from the comment. It would seem; derogating one's markings was obviously a profound and deep cutting insult among turians.

"Wah! Y-you! H-how dare...! Grrr!" Zed fumbled with his words, struggling to interpose a rebuttal, before giving up all together and clenching his brow with a wrathful glower. "You are a real piece of work lady, you know that?! You know I don't hit women, but damn it, you tempt me! Why, if I wasn't handcuffed right now, I'd-"

"Hey, now! Hold it, let's not get-"

"Oh-ho, just try it, gomer!" Vanessa retorted, cutting both Zed and Jacob off, as she cynically scoffed at the target of her hostility. "We'll see who knocks who down... Here. I'll even put my hands behind my back, for you!" She stipulated, as she locked her hands behind

her. "How 'bout that, huh?! Come on!"

"Lady, you're crazy!"

"Hey, whoa, whoa, whoa!" Garrus immediately interceded, as the dispute showed signs of escalating out of control. "Let's all just calm down, okay? Remember, we're all in the same mess, here!" He explained, as he sat forward, leaning past Zee for a better look over at Vanessa. "I know the situation has got us all a little edgy, but there's no reason to be at each other's throats just yet."

The towel enrobed beauty, with eyes of sparkling amethyst yielded to Garrus with a humble, yet hesitant nod. As did the young turian officer. Vanessa then turned back towards Jacob, and the two carried on with their own private palaver.

"Hmph!" Grunt chimed in with a snicker, just then, addressing Garrus from his place further down the front row. "Why'd you stop them? I thought things were finally about to get interesting!"

"Yeah, well I'm sick of interesting!" Garrus replied, muttering through his teeth, annoyed, as he rose to his feet and stretched. He pivoted his head around, making large circles, as he stretched his cuffed arms back, and rotated his shoulders, bringing about a series of relieving pops.

"Hey!" An authoritative voice suddenly yelled out, as Garrus continued his unwinding routine.

One of the many felonious officers, a salarian to be exact, who was on guard duty around the Promenade Deck, took quick notice of the large, dangerous turian stretching on his feet, and befittingly acknowledged this as a threat.

"Hey! You sit back down!" The salarian forcefully decreed - keeping his distance, as he made a slow, wary approach towards Garrus, with his hand on his holstered gun. Seeing this, a second salarian, and an asari guard joined him, and followed suit.

"Hey, yourself!" Garrus hollered back, indignantly, with no intent of sitting back down. "Now, you've had us sitting here, crammed together like a bunch of canned zefrings, for almost two hours now! We're all tired and on edge here. And I, for one, have to go to the bathroom. And I'm sure I'm not the only one!" He announced, in a resounding voice, as he twisted his torso around to address the congested crowd of hostages sitting behind him. "Am I, people!?"

"No, he's not!"

"How dare you keep us here like this!"

"Yeah, leave us alone!"

"Let us go, you ruffians!"

The rabble of hostages quickly rose to dissension - their hostile, clamoring voices coalescing together into a single, blaring, incomprehensible uproar. Garrus turned back to face the trio of guards, which looked on at the agitated mob with angst and

apprehension.

A brash smirk came over his expression, as he began again. "If you don't, at least, start giving these people restroom breaks, then-" He paused for a moment, as a peculiar look shone in his eyes. "-you're either gonna have a riotâ€¦ or one hell of a mess to clean up, on your handsâ€¦" He explained, wincing his eyes, with a slow shake of his head. "What's it gonna be?"

"Uhm, uhâ€¦" The salarian at the head of the small group of guards stammered in response, as he looked back and forth between his compatriots - either of which only seemed capable of providing him with an indeterminate shrug. And as they stood there, indecisive, the crowded mass seemed to grow even more boisterous and turbulent.

"Uh-a-alright, alright!" He conceded, projecting his, and holding his hands up haltingly, in an effort to pacify the riotous rabble. "We'll uhâ€¦ We'll start taking people two by two to the restrooms. But stay orderly, or we will use force, you got that?!"

With that, the conglomeration began to quiet and settle down, at least partially appeased.

"There's about a thousand people here, and you're only gonna take 'em two at a timeâ€¦?" Jacob queried, raising a dubious eyebrow.

"Yeah, that's right." The salarian officer affirmed, with a stringent, cocksure nod. "But, not you seven, though." He added, pointing a finger at Garrus, and sweeping it back and forth across the front row, to include; Legion, Grunt, Mordin, Garrus, Zdrawkoh, Jacob, and Ms. Vanessa Masters - seated respectively, in consecutive order.

"We'll get the lot of you a nice bucket, or something, you can useâ€¦"

"A bucket?!" Grunt, Garrus, Zee, Jacob, and Vanessa all made the same appalled, wide-eyed exclamation, nearly in unison.

"I'll bust your face in with a bucket, how 'bout that?!" Jacob threatened, in a rage.

"Hey, you don't like it?" The blackguard salarian continued, with an overbearing timbre, and an apathetic shrug of his shoulders. "Then I'll just radio Commander Kim, and you can take it up with the next hostage he decides to waste. Clear?"

A seething grimace burned in Jacob's eyes, as he furrowed his brow, and clenched his lips in vile contempt. "â€¦Clear." He conceded, through his teeth, finding little room to do otherwise.

Meanwhile, Garrus sighed. "You knowâ€¦ On second thought-" He began, as he slowly sat back down, defeated. "-I don't gotta go after all..."

"Alright, you twoâ€¦ Let's go."

A short distance away, an amber haired woman, in a silky, dark green dress, sat on the floor watching as the guards took the first pair of

hostages to the restroom. It was a yellowish-brown skinned salarian man, taking a little asari girl - likely his daughter - with him, by the hand.

"Karin, lookâ€¦" She urged to the woman sitting across from her, as she watched. "That turian got them to allow us restroom breaksâ€¦"

Dr. Karin Chakwas looked up, after doing a brief check on her patient; a stately dressed, unconscious gentleman lying peacefully, on a bed of pillows, between the two of them. The collar and shoulders of his white dress shirt were stained in a pronounced, crimson blotch. But bandages were visible from around the back of his neck, and skull, where his gaping wound had been treated. And a stable set of vital signs shone on a holographic display, projecting from the metallic device clamped around his arm, which also fed a clear liquid solution, from a vial, into his bloodstream.

"Hmphâ€¦" Dr. Chakwas' chest bounced from a reserved chuckle, as she smiled and looked on. "Yeah, that's Garrus for you; ever valiant, if a little hot-tempered, at times."

The woman in the green dress squinted, as her mind conjured an idea. "I wonder if I can find a way to sneak out, and look for our son, if I say I need to use the lady's roomâ€¦" She pondered, aloud.

"Angela, no..." Dr. Chakwas immediately denounced. "Don't try it. Don't give these brutes an excuse to hurt you. You know they won't hesitate. They've already executed the Captain, in cold bloodâ€¦"

"Well, what would you have me do, Karin?" Angela pleaded - her voice growing shaky, and distraught, as her eyes quickly welled up with tears. "I can't just keep sitting here, doing nothing, when I don't know what's happening to my precious, little boy. This is torture, I can't stand it anymoreâ€¦!" She grievously exclaimed, as she rocked back and forth, restlessly.

"Oh honey, I know. I understand, believe meâ€¦" Dr. Chakwas offered, in an attempt to assuage the panicked mother's fears - Her eyes reflecting the deepest sympathy and compassion for her, as she continued. "But if you try to leave now, the only thing you'll accomplish is getting yourself killedâ€¦ I'm asking you to please give Shepard, and the others, a little more time. I've seen those people do things that wereâ€¦ BEYOND impossible. And although these hoods may not hesitate to kill us, they've taken great strides to keep us all alive, thus far. We're valuable to them, so there's no reason why they'd harm your son. I'm sure they just haven't found him. Trust me. Wherever he is, he's safeâ€¦ I'm sure of it." She assured, with conviction.

"Oh, may the merciful heavens hear you, Karinâ€¦" Angela begged, with a sniffle, as she cradled her eyes and forehead into her palms. "I hope to god you're rightâ€¦ Oh, my poor, sweet, little Mattyâ€¦"

"Mâ€¦ Ma-mattâ€¦" Angela and Dr. Chakwas both looked down, as Alex unexpectedly began to stir - slurring and muttering, as his brow twitched, and his pupils began to flicker behind his eyelids. "Mâ€¦"

"Matthew!" He shouted out, as his eyes split wide open, and his head shot up, off its pillow. "Matthew! Mathew, where are you?!" He exclaimed, frantically, as he struggled to sit up, only to be held down by Dr. Chakwas. "Where am I?! Where's my son?!"

"Mr. Farrell! Mr. Farrell, please! You have to calm down!" Dr. Chakwas implored, as she wrestled to keep the frenzied man in a horizontal state. "You're not well, sir! Your wounds are still fresh, and prone to further laceration!"

"Alex, Alex, shhhh!" Angela urged soothingly, as she took hold of his flailing hand, and squeezed it tight. "Shhhh! Calm down, my love. It's me."

"Angie?!" He questioned, looking up at her with pleading, fearful eyes, as his thrashing was suddenly pacified. "What's going on? Where's Matthew?" He beckoned, as his glassy pupils rolled around the vast room, in a disorientated stupor. "Why isn't he here with you?!"

"He's not here, Alex! He's still lost, somewhere on the ship!"

Her words were somewhat drowned out by a sharp ringing in his ears. And his head throbbed like the pounding of a kettledrum. But he could still distinguish enough to understand the words: "He's still lost."

"What?!" The wounded man exclaimed, nearly gagging from the shock, as his frenzied state returned. "Why did you stay here, with ME?! Why didn't you go look for him?!" He demanded, with an amalgam of terror, anger, and desperation, etched on his face. Just then, his gaze turned to the woman holding him down. "Who the hell are you?! Get your hands off of me!" He ordered, as he tried to pry her hands off his chest with his own. He was still too weak to succeed, however.

"Alex, this is Karin Chakwas. She's a Doctor!" A teary eyed Angela explained, as she began caressing the side of his face, in an attempt to quell his frenzy. "She's the one that saved your life!"

"I don't care who she is, I'm going to find our son! Move!" He demanded, as he mustered a burst of strength, and shoved her aside. It wasn't a hard shove, mind you. Dr. Chakwas simply landed back, seated on her hands and rear, from the knelt position she was in. But Alex was determined to go out and look for his little boy.

He bore an adamant will, but his body was still far too weak and debilitated to be of any help to him. He struggled to get to his feet, wobbling, and shaking on spaghetti legs all the while, before simply collapsing back down hard, onto his side, with a painful grunt. "Umph!"

"Alex, stop!" Angela pleaded, rushing to his side, on her knees, as he clawed at the floor, trying to drag himself to an upright position.

"Mr. Farrell, you have to listen to me!" Dr. Chakwas implored, pulling at Alex' shoulder, and turning him onto his back, while he persistently tried to rise to his feet again - this time, however,

being restrained by both women. "You're in no shape to go anywhere! You can't even stand on your own two legs. If you keep struggling, you'll only exacerbate your condition!"

"Alex, please. Listen to her!"

"You're suffering the onsets of a mild concussion, as well as an acute anemia from the blood loss." Karin continued to explain, as the two women held the thrashing man down. "I've stabilized your condition, but you're not completely out of danger. If you try to leave now, the only thing you'll accomplish is leaving your wife a widow and your little boy fatherless!"

"I don't *câ€* I have to try!" Alex declared, pleading with his eyes, as they glazed over with tears. "He's my son, don't you understand?!"

"Yes, of course I do!" Karin sympathized - relaxing her hold on him, once he showed signs of placidity. "But Mr. Farrell, they'll never let you leave here. And they nearly killed you once!" She said, with a grim look in her eyes. "Without medical attention, you would surely have died. If you try to resist again, they WILL kill you, for certain!"

Alex exhaled a shaky sigh, as he shut his eyes, and turned away, forcing twin tear drops to stream out, and drip onto the carpeted floor.

"Don't either of you lose hope!" Dr. Chakwas beseeched, in a soft, compassionate tone. "I know your son's safe! I'm sure of it." She proclaimed, utterly convinced. "He's small. There are a million places, on this ship, where a small boy, like him, could hide and stay safe! They won't find him!" She assured, as Alex turned back to look at her. "And neither would you."

With a knot in his throat, and his brow quivering, Alex turned to the other woman at his side - the one squeezing his hand. He looked up, watching as she fought a losing battle to hold back her own tears.

"Angie?" He whispered questioningly, as if looking to her for wisdom, or divinity.

"What else can we do, my love?" She replied, with a sniffle, as she wiped away the tracks of his tears, from his cheeks. "What else can we do?"

"And Mr. Farrell, there's one other thing you should know!" Dr. Chakwas added, causing Alex and Angela to look back to her. "Your son! He isn't the *_only_* straggler loose on this ship!"

* * *

><p>"Ah! Ah! Ah! PBFFFT!" Cameron sputtered a muffled sneeze into her left palm, which still managed to reverberate off of the confined, metal walls, as she stepped off the bottom rung of a ladder. "Ugh! I hate this." She declared in a dreary, nasally voice - her eyes red, and watery, as she turned and stepped up, behind Miranda, preparing to follow.<p>

"You can't possibly still be THAT cold, with that coat on!" Miranda grumbled, looking up from the holographic map of the ventilation network, projecting from her omni-tool.

She, Gordon, and the under the weather McClane, had just descended from the ladder, down into a long, cramped, metal chamber which appeared to be a ventilation shaft junction, of sorts. There were a few, sparse utility lamps mounted onto the walls, but nary enough to provide any sort of adequate lighting. So Gordon illuminated the way with his omni-tool flashlight, out in front. But even if the chamber was aglow in fulgent, crystal luminescence; maneuvering around would still be a somewhat arduous task, as a variety of ducts and shafts extended from wall to wall, and from floor to ceiling, in every which way, creating a labyrinth of obstacles.

"It's not the coldâ€¦" Cameron nasally explained, with a series of runny nosed snorts, as she followed Gordon and Miranda through the chamber - squeezing her way past the metallic hurdles, like trying to navigate through an aluminum jungle. "It's all thisâ€¦ this-Ahâ€¦ Ahh! AHHH! PBFFT! Ughâ€¦" She creakily groaned, as she pulled her now mucus covered hands away from her nose. "All this dustâ€¦! It's really wreaking havoc with my allergiesâ€¦" She said, as she loathingly wiped her hands off on the dust imbued bottom of her sky-blue dress, after finding herself unable to contrive and alternate solution.

"Watch your heads, here." Gordon advised, from his place at the head of the trio, as he crouched down to get under a low mounted air duct tunnel. "Oh, and Miss-" He added, looking back over his shoulder a little. "-if it helps, there's a handkerchief in the coat's inside pocket."

Cameron's red, fluid filled eyes shot open in disbelief, as she immediately looked down at the coat, and pulled the lapels away from her chest. "Oi, now you tell meâ€¦" She said, as she caught sight of the handkerchief corner sticking out of the inside pocket. Before another sneeze could come, she pulled it out, and unfurled it with a swift, flapping motion. When she felt her nose start tingling again, she quickly smothered it in the white cloth, and blew it like a raucous trumpet, sounding a cavalry charge.

"Ughâ€¦" The loud, bothersome noise grated on Miranda's nerves, forcing to roll her eyes. "You are just a bloody bundle of whine, aren't you?"

"Watch it here. Be very carefulâ€¦" Gordon advised.

But between Miranda's condescension, and the blowing of her own nose, Cameron neither heard Freeman's warning, nor did she see them turn the darkened, narrow corner, just ahead.

"I'm not whining, I'm sneezingâ€¦!" The defensive reporter proclaimed, as she continued on - her vision impaired by the darkness, and the water in her eyes. "And I can't help itâ€¦" She said - her head reeling further and further back again, as she bumbled forward. "Ahâ€¦ Ahâ€¦! Ah! Ow!" She suddenly cried out in distress, as she felt a sharp pain jolt through her scalp, from something snagging her hair, and jerking it back hard.

"Hey!" Cameron snapped, as she instinctively reached up to the back

of her head, and felt a hand holding on tight to a wad of her golden hair. "What's the big idea?" At that moment, her eyes split open, and she was met with a rather sobering image. A few inches in front of her face were the exposed blades of a small, but rapidly spinning, outward blowing, metal fan. "Oh! My!"

"How about you help where you're going, and keep your eyes open?" Miranda sternly admonished, as she released her clutch on the reporter's hair.

Gordon had since turned back around, and watched as Cameron took a few slow, speechless steps back, away from the spinning blades. She hadn't felt a breeze, because the fan's current was aimed outward, into one of the many ducts surrounding them. But one more maladroit step in that direction, and she would have been met with grave misfortune.

"Ooh, I'm REALLY starting to hate fans!" Cameron said, with a shudder, finally breaking her dumbstruck silence, as she turned to Miranda. "Thank you, I'm sorry. I wasn't paying attention, and I didn't think that!" McClane stopped, and exhaled a slow, tranquil breath to regain her composure. She then looked to Miranda, bestowing her gratitude with her eyes, before reiterating it verbally. "Thank you, ma'am."

"It's fine!" Miranda forgivingly acknowledged - her stoic demeanor moderately softened now. "Just! Be more careful, would you? This isn't a vacation anymore."

Cameron smiled bashfully at Miranda, and nodded - her eyes still gleaming with appreciation and gratitude. And as Miranda turned back around, she was surprised to find Gordon staring intently at her, with a wide-mouthed, contented grin engraved on his face.

"What?" The operative in the red dress beckoned, perplexed.

"!"

"What?!"

"Oh, nothing!" Gordon eventually answered - casually turning back around, and pretending to shrug the whole thing off, though unable to fully dispatch the smile from his face. "Nothing at all! I've always known that that 'tough girl' routine of yours was just to cover your softie side!"

"Softie side, huh?!" Miranda jokingly chided, as she gave him a playfully gentle shove, from behind. "Keep it moving, egghead, or I'll SHOW you a tough girl routine..."

Gordon chuckled, in spite of the pressing situation, as he continued along. "Is this the one?" He asked, still laughing a little under his breath, as he came up to a wide, horizontal expanding duct, running along the ground, and into the wall.

"Yes, this is the one." Miranda confirmed, double checking her omni-tool map just to be certain. "This'll lead us across the ship's main galley, on the Mezzanine Deck, straight to the engine room."

"Perfect!" Gordon cheerfully expressed, as he reached down, and worked his fingers into a grate situated on the roof of the air duct. He tightened his grip on the bars, and pulled with all the strength he could muster - grinding his teeth, and clenching his lips as he did so. After a few seconds, he gave up all together, retracted his arms, and began rubbing his sore, left appendage, starting from the cast around his forearm, and running up, past his elbow, to his shoulder, with a slightly pained look on his face. Just then, he remembered the Stillson pipe wrench he had acquired, which he now kept holstered at his abdomen, behind his belt. He slid it out, and raised it above his head, preparing to bash the grate in. Just before he could bring his arm down, the grate suddenly became aglow with a shimmering, blue, radiance before simply popping off of the duct, with ease, and levitating away, to the side.

"Having a little trouble without your gravity gun, Dr. Freeman?" Miranda said, in a sly, flirtatious tone, as the glow around her hand faded.

"Oh, not so long as I have you, Ms. Lawson." Gordon replied, matching her timbre, as he replaced the wrench behind his belt, and stepped into the newly opened cavity. "Shall we?" He asked, as he extended his hand towards the porcelain skinned brunette, just as though he were inviting her to dance.

"Wait, wait, wait!" Cameron interjected, just then, as Miranda took his hand, and climbed into the broad sized air duct, behind Gordon. "You mean you have a gravity gun, too?!"

* * *

><p>Young Matthew Farrell slowly strolled across the small, confined bridge, gazing up at the darkened, inert helm controls, and the two empty seats behind them. He was too small to get a good look out of the forward windows, but he could still see the stars zooming by outside, like vibrant ribbons of pure light.<p>

Finding little of interest here, he turned his attention to the rear, right-hand corner of the bridge, and to a tall, tower-like device situated there. It was silver, bulky, and plain, extending from the floor, all the way to the ceiling. There were three large antennas, of varying size, protruding from the very top of the apparatus, and a sizeable, dull blue colored transmitter dish mounted onto the front, and angled in an upward skew. There were also a number of small, holographic control panels shinning on the front; most of which radiated in bright, deterrent red - probably indicating that the use of said controls were restricted to a particular user.

"Whatcha doin'?" Matty curiously questioned, as he stood by, watching Tali work.

The skillful quarian was laid out, on her side, with her upper body curved around towards the rear of the tall transmitting structure. Her arms were elbow deep into an opened compartment at the bottom, back of the device, and the small, personal, tool case she had recovered from their former stateroom laid beside her, close to her knees - split open like a book, with a few tools missing, and a few others scattered on the floor next to it.

"Wellâ€¦" Tali started to explain, as she worked. "This thing is called a comm jammer. And what that means; is that the bad people can use it to keep us from sending messages, or making calls. What I'm trying to do is fix it so that I can open up a new line, and send out a call for help."

"So you'll be able to call people again?!" The inquisitive boy beckoned, with a sudden eagerness.

"That's right."

"Does that mean we can call my mom and dad, and see if they're okayâ€¦?"

The painfully hopeful question caused Tali to stop working, cold. She sighed, as she pulled her busy hands out of the device, and sat up to face the boy.

"Noâ€¦ I'm sorry, kreshaâ€¦" She began, with a voice mired in regret, and a sympathy showing in her eyes. "But we won't be able to call your parents. To call them, I'd have to completely turn this thing off. And if I do that, the bad people will know exactly where we are, on the ship."

"Ohâ€¦" Matty said, bowing his head, saddened and disheartened. "And they'd find usâ€¦?"

Tali bit down on her lip, behind her mask, as a knot formed in her throat, on the boy's behalf. All she had in her to do at that moment was to give him a slow, apologetic nod.

"Butâ€¦ You will get them back, right?!" Matty beckoned, as he looked back up - his previous optimism returning, at least partially. "You promisedâ€¦?"

"I promise." Tali immediately acknowledged, as her eyes beamed with a reassuring glow.

"â€¦Okay." Matty reluctantly accepted, as he bashfully placed his hands behind his back, and looked down at Tali's opened tool case. Meanwhile, Tali lay back down, wasting little time in going back to her work.

"Can I helpâ€¦?" She heard the little boy ask. Not wanting to squelch his enthusiasm, Tali turned onto her back for a better look at him.

"Well, actually I'm almost done here." She genially informed. "But if you'd like, you can hand me that anodic shunt transposer." She said, pointing towards a small, dark, discus shaped apparatus still embedded snugly in her opened tool case. "It's the round, black thing, there in the center of my toolkit. Just be very careful not to touch the little pen shaped thing next to it, okay?" She instructed in a cordial, yet earnest tone of voice - fearful that he may want to fiddle with her hazardous micro-laser cutter.

Matty approached her tool case, and bent down to retrieve the instrument in question, with Tali looking on. "You mean this thing that looks like a hockey puck?" He asked, as he pulled the small gadget out of its bedding.

"Uhm, yes, that's the one." Tali affirmed, sounding a bit bewildered at first, as Matthew handed her the device. "Thank you."

"_What's a hockey puckâ€|?"_ She wondered to herself, as she went back to her work - summoning a small set of holographic keys on the device's face, and adeptly starting to punch away at them.

"Anything elseâ€|?"

"No, little one." Tali graciously answered the helpful young lad. "I'll be done here, in a few minutes, but thank you for your help. You're a perfect, little, gentleman."

Matty smiled, as he watched Tali lie back down, and delve her arms back into the transmitter's inner workings. And as his grin faded, he turned his attention towards the opened bridge door, leading to the cargo area of the ship. Finding little else to do here, he decided he might be of use elsewhere.

A long streak of crusted, dried blood stained the right side of Commander John Shepard's face. It etched his skin from the gash in his right temple, where it originated from, all the way down to his neck and shoulder. The opened laceration had since clotted over and stopped bleeding, but it left a lasting, crimson imprint on his once spotless, white dress shirt collar. The steadfast soldier stood poised and alert, with the guise of a covert commando preparing to stealthily burst into an enemy occupied room, and neutralize its occupants. Shepard had positioned himself just inside the small ship's cargo bay, peeking around the corner, past the umbilical, and into the neighboring ship. He held his back firmly against the wall with his gun gripped tightly in both hands, aimed down towards the floor. He was completely absorbed by his task, guarding the entrance of the small cargo ship - watching for the subtlest movement and listening for the faintest sound. Which at that moment, he heard.

"Matthewâ€|" He acknowledged, mildly surprised, as he turned for a split second, to see the young boy approaching, after hearing the sound of his small footsteps. "Heyâ€| You really shouldn't be out here. You should be back on the bridge, with Tali."

"Ohâ€|" The boy uttered penitently, as he stopped cold in the middle of the short corridor leading from the bridge, to the cargo bay. "â€|I'm sorry."

"No, it's alright." Shepard pardoned, still keeping his focus toward the outside. "You can stay if you want, justâ€| Don't come out here, okay? Stay there. And if you hear me tell you to go to Tali, you go as quick as you can, alright?" As John presented his conditions to the boy, he managed to glimpse him acknowledging with a nod, out of the corner of his eye.

"Soâ€|" He began again, trying to assume a casual, relaxed demeanor. "How you holdin' up, trooper? You okay?"

"Uh-huh, I'm okayâ€|" Matty assured, sounding a little down however, as he browsed around the walls of the short corridor. "But I miss my mom and dadâ€| I was sorta being bad when the bad policemen took them awayâ€|" He confessed, with his eyes sinking, and his head drooping

down, over his chest.

"Ah, don't worry about that. I'm sure they forgive you." John encouragingly consoled, as he continued to peer past the rocking umbilical, into the Illustria's disarrayed loading bay, with his weapon at the ready. "And we're gonna get them back for you real soon, okay? Don't you worry."

"Okay" Matty said, trying hard to be brave and optimistic - a semblance that was easily betrayed by the despondence in his shaky voice. He sighed, with a knot in his throat, as his lip and chin began to quiver.

From the corner of his eye, John watched the sweet little boy turn away, and start wiping his face. He could see him quivering, and hear him sniffle, and whimper. And it pained him.

"Hey" John called out, trying to keep his attention adequately divided between the entrance, and the anguished child. When Matty heard, he turned back around, swiftly trying to wipe any traces of fluid from his eyes and off his cheeks.

"It's okay to be scared, Matthew..." Shepard admitted, in an earnest yet empathetic voice, as the two locked eyes. "But no matter what it takes We're gonna get them back for you." He asserted with a single, determined nod, and a stone resolve carved into his expression.

"I know" Matty acceded, with the traces of smile starting to creep back onto his timid face. "Uhm" He began again, stuttering and twiddling his fingers, as he tried to change the subject. "Tali says that the the uhm the the big thing that's so that we can't make calls She says she's almost fixed it."

"Oh" Well that's good." Shepard cheerfully replied.

"Are" Are you mad at each other for something?" The inquisitive boy reluctantly put forward.

"Heh" The question made John chuckle, as he gave a dismal shake of his head. "No, not exactly, buddy. She's the one who's mad at me. And she's got every right to be" He conceded, with a sigh. "I was a little hard on her And I had no reason to be She didn't do anything wrong." He confessed, shaking his head, as he bit down on his lips - never taking his eyes away from the entrance, however.

"Does that mean you're in the varren hut, tonight?"

"The varren hut?" Shepard questioned, perplexed.

"Whenever my mom and my dad get mad at each other-" The boy started to explain. "-my dad tells me; 'son, if you ever have a wife, make sure you keep her happy, or you'll end up in the varren hut, like me'"

John grinned, as he suddenly understood.

"But, I don't really know what he means, 'cause we don't have a pet varren, or nothing" Matty continued, sounding a bit perplexed

himself, now. "And my dad never leaves to go to any hutâ€¦ I just see him go to sleep, on the couch, in the living room, sometimesâ€¦"

"Hehâ€¦ Well, your dad's right. You should always keep a lady happy. And I do think I'll be ending up in the varren hut, tonightâ€¦"

"They never stay mad for very long, thoughâ€¦" The boy elaborated, casually shrugging his shoulders. "And they're almost always happy." He stopped, and looked at Shepard intently for a while - something clearly on his mind, though he was too hesitant to say it. But it didn't take long for him to get over his qualms. "Soâ€¦" He started again, swaying back and forth, as he made small circles on the floor, with the tip of his shoe. "Doâ€¦ you and Tali have little kids?"

"Kids?!" John blurted out, practically jumping, as he completely turned his attention away from the umbilical passage, for the first time. "Uh, noâ€¦ No, we don't have any children of our ownâ€¦" He uneasily informed, before quickly bringing his attention back to the corridor.

"How come?" Came another inquiry, causing Shepard's eyes to bounce open again, and forcing him to sputter about nervously.

"Uhmâ€¦ Wellâ€¦ Well, because we don'tâ€¦ I mean, we're not evenâ€¦ I suppose we could alwaysâ€¦ adopt, butâ€¦ Well, I'm not even sure if she'llâ€¦" John stopped and exhaled a deep breath. "Heh." He let forth an uneasy chuckle. "Why are you asking me thisâ€¦?" He beckoned, trying to mask his discomfort with an amicable laugh.

"Uhm, I dunnoâ€¦" Matty coyly put forth, as his pupils wandered listlessly across the ceiling. "I was just wondering, 'cause I think you and Tali would be a good mommy and daddyâ€¦"

The sentiment put a smile back on Shepard's face. "Oh yeahâ€¦?" He asked, flattered. "You think so, huh?"

Matty nodded - his face beaming with the glint of a child's innocence and honesty.

"Well, thanks." The Commander bestowed, giving a gracious nod in the boy's direction. "That's nice, it means a lot."

"â€¦Do you want some, someday?"

"Do I want some, whatâ€¦? Kids?" Shepard posed, making sure he understood the question. Once again, he spied the boy nodding genially, out of the corner of his eye.

"Uhmâ€¦" With his eyes still on the entrance, his mind began to wander a bit. And as it did - as he heard the gleeful sounds of laughter, and a little voice call out "daddy!", a sanguine smile involuntarily began to creep in on his face. "Wellâ€¦" He began, still somewhat mired in a day dream. "I think maybe-

"Mattyâ€¦!?" A female voice unexpectedly called out from the bridge, just then, cutting the Commander off before he could answer. "Maâ€¦ Oh, there you areâ€¦" Tali expressed, with relief, as she walked into

the small corridor, behind the boy. "You okay?" She asked, as she laid her hands upon his shoulders, and massaged them a little.

"Uh-huh..." Matty answered, looking up at her. "I was just talking to Mr. John."

"Ohâ€|" Tali replied, still carrying a heavy hint of spite in her voice. "Well, Mr. Johnâ€| Or Mr. Commander Shepard, sirâ€| We're ready to transmit communicationsâ€| SIR."

Shepard groaned and laughed all at once, as he drew his head all the way back, looking up towards the ceiling, in dejection. "Oh, bosh'tet, what have I doneâ€|?"

23. Chapter 23: The Human Hunt

****Salvation: Episode I - The Taking of the Carmenta
Illustria****

Disclaimer: This fan-fiction is part of an episodic series taking place after Salvation: A Half-Life/Mass Effect Universe Fan Fiction, which will lead directly to its sequel, Salvation II: Project Prometheus. These episodes and sequel take place OUTSIDE of the Mass Effect 3 continuity. Characters property of their respective companies, Half-Life created by Valve and Mass Effect created by Bioware.

****Chapter 23: The Human Hunt****

A hand, wrapped in an armored glove, glided smoothly across the stairwell wall in a downward skew, as the mercenary it belonged to descended. She was an asari mercenary, with eyes of black pitch, and a sleeted rancor in her veins. The fringe crowning her head, like a corona, was a deeper, darker shade of blue than the rest of her skin - almost navy in color - and it was accented with narrow, white stripes, running along each fringe from her forehead, all the way to the tips. She wore a burgundy set of jaded, battered armor, which was branded with a distinctive white skull on each shoulder, and marred with the dents, scratches, and pocks of a thousand triumphant battles. But despite the armor's battle-scarred appearance, it was still exceptionally sturdy and functional, and would surely see her through a thousand more bloody conquests.

Accompanying her, was a similarly attired turian - donned in a set of armor that was a bit heavier, and just as weathered. He had dark brown skin, with red markings accenting his deep, gray eyes. And the painted white design around his mouth was a set of sharp, jagged points, like the teeth of a jack-o-lantern - etched in such a way that it gave him the semblance of a vicious beast, with fangs bared.

Just then, as they reached the next floor down, the asari's gliding hand stopped dead, and pressed firmly against the wall.

"Here!" The mercenary pointedly declared, as she watched a faintly blinking blip on her opposite arm's omni-tool screen. "This deck. It's leveled off here. It's no longer descending."

Taking Teshya's word at face value, Davix, her turian abettor, gave a nonchalant shrug of his shoulders, pulled the heavy assault rifle off his armor's weapon's dock, on his back, and watched it expand to full size, in his hands. The two ceased their calculated, downward descent within the stairwell, and stepped through the nearby door, beside a mounted plaque labeled: Mezzanine Deck.

As they entered the floor, they stepped into a very short hallway, tucked away into an obscure corner of the deck. Suddenly, the two veteran mercs heard a rapidly approaching clamor of tumultuous laughter, comprised of a number of distinct voices coalesced together. Davix wasted no time in priming his weapon, and aiming it in the direction of the oncoming sound. Just then, the culprits turned the corner, and found themselves face to face with the barrel of a rather large assault rifle, being wielded by an even larger turian.

"Oh, whoa, whoa, whoaâ€¦!" The uniformed human officer, at the head of a squad of six others, exclaimed, putting his hands up, in a surrendering fashion. "Easy, easy! W-we're friendlies! We're Illustria Securityâ€¦! You guys are the Blood Pack mercs Commander Kim told us about, right?"

"Geeâ€¦" Davix retorted, in a cynical tone, as he lowered his weapon, and looked down at his fortified burgundy armor, marked with a white skull insignia. "What gave us awayâ€¦?"

"Beat it, insects!" Teshya sneered, without the slightest show of benevolence. "You're no friendlies to me. Now, get outta here, before I decide to prove it to youâ€¦!" She callously asserted, before shoving her way past them, straight through the middle of the group, like a bowling ball through pins.

"Okay, okay, sheesh, we're goingâ€¦" The human officer abdicated, as Davix followed suit, behind his asari cohort.

"Hey, just one thing, thoughâ€¦!" The guard called out, with one hand cupped around his mouth, as the rest of his group made their way into the stairwell. "If you're looking for something on this level, I doubt you'll find it! We're one of the sweep teams, and we just did a thorough check - floor to ceiling, and everything in-betweenâ€¦!" He yelled out to the two, as Teshya held her hologram covered forearm out in front - letting it lead her like a divining rod. "We're done with this deck. You won't find anyone or anything in thereâ€¦ except maybe some leftovers. But heyâ€¦ knock yourselves outâ€¦!" With his piece said, the human waved his hands dismissively at the Blood Pack duo, before turning and stepping into the stairwell.

"â€¦You sure you tracked it to this deck?" Davix hesitantly queried, as they proceeded into a wide open, curved, luxurious hallway.

On one side of the hall, exquisite paintings of exotic worlds, framed in glistening gold, hung on the walls. And striking flora from across the galaxy lined the floors, in finely crafted, ceramic planters. The opposite side provided a stunning, and absolutely breathtaking, view of the majestic stars whisking by outside, through a series of tall windows.

"You gonna believe some third-rate, outlet store vermin, over me?" Teshya snidely questioned, as she intently continued to monitor the

radar screen flashing on her omni-tool - caring very little for the celestial view outside.

"Hey, I was just askingâ€|"

The hardened asari maintained a slow stride down the passageway - shuffling sideways along the entire wall, as if whatever she was looking for was inside the wall itself.

"Of course I'm not certainâ€|" She confessed, as she squinted her eyes on the tiny, dim, little blip. "But I'm definitely getting some faint movement signatures around this deck. It's just too hard to pinpointâ€| It's not exactly easy tracking movement in the AC vents, through the wallsâ€|"

"We could always go in, after himâ€|" Davix suggested, smirking, and cocking his head to the side, as he gave a casual shrug of his shoulder.

"Chyeahâ€|" Teshya scoffed, derisively. "Crawling around in the ducts like some dirty, stinking, rajakâ€|? I'll leave that to the humans."

The two continued along until the passageway eventually opened into a grand, central hallway - splitting the ship down the middle, and breaking off into several other smaller corridors, like the branches radiating from the trunk of a tree - each of which lead to a multitude of various other clubs, restaurants, and delightful little diversions. The floors were blanketed in striking, red cashmere carpeting, and the molding was gilded in gold. Fine crystal chandeliers lined the ceiling, and dancing holographic lights and signs extended as far back as the eye could see. The only thing missing was the stately dressed patrons enjoying it all. There was no musicâ€| No commotionâ€| No sounds of jubilation, or joyful abandon. It was an affluent, extravagant ghost town, left glimmering, and undisturbed.

"It looks like it's on the move." Teshya announced, with no amount of certainty, as she held her omni-tool aimed at the wall - raising it above her head in an attempt at obtaining a clearer reading. "I think it's this wayâ€|" She said, as she started down the broad hallway, hugging the left-hand side, with Davix in tow.

"Great! We can grab a bite to eat!" The turian merrily expressed, as they passed a shimmering, animated sign, labeled "Mazelai Dinning Hall", which pointed a dancing arrow in the direction they were headed.

"Quit thinking with your stomach!"

* * *

><p>"Citadel. Alliance Directory." A female voice announced, as the outline of a black, short haired woman, in a casual Systems Alliance uniform materialized on the bridge's main screen. "How may I direct your transmiâ€|" The operator's words were suddenly stunted, as her eyes flew wide open, and her mouth hung agape. "Yâ€| You're Commander Shepardâ€|! Oh my goshâ€|! Uh, h-how may I help you, Commander?"<p>

"Yes, I need you to connect me to the Alliance Citadel Outpostâ€|"
The steadfast soldier instructed, straightaway. "Preferably, the
highest ranking Alliance Official there."

John looked down at the woman on the holographic screen, from his place, standing directly beside the empty helmsman's seat. In the next seat over - the place usually belonging to the co-pilot - Tali sat, with her focus divided equally between two different screens in front of her. One screen exhibited a panning surveillance feed of the large, empty loading bay, belonging to the neighboring luxury liner. The other displayed an expansive galaxy map, with a number of red error messages flashing throughout. The adept quarian worked diligently, punching away at the holographic keys, as she tried to correct some sort of malfunction - but by the look of her exasperated pace, and the sound of her series of frustrated sighs, she was having little luck. Matty stood directly beside her, on her right hand side, looking curiously across, over at Shepard, and the woman he was talking to. But he was mindful enough of the situation, and its significance, to recognize a time to remain courteously quiet.

"Wellâ€| That would be Admiral Hackettâ€|" The operator on the screen explained, as a brief deluge of static washed over her visage. "He's on the station right now, on Alliance businessâ€|"

"Would you connect me, please? Tell him it's a priority message."

"Y-yes, sir. I'll see if he's availableâ€|" The woman nervously assured. "One momentâ€|"

* * *

><p>"Of course, sir. I'll be seeing to that personally." A young man in a dress uniform, with a writing stylus wedged above his ear, and a datapad in his hands, acknowledged. He was responding to the man he was following along through the open aired, Citadel Presidium; a hardened, haggard old soldier, who was regally clad in a Naval cap, and a very similar, only much more decorated uniform, than his own.<p>

"Oh, and on another note, sirâ€|" The young man continued. "I'm told that the vortigaunts have happily accepted the interim council's invitation to the Citadel Embassies. It probably won't be made official until sometime next month, but they're requesting the presence of someone calledâ€| 'The Free Man', at their embassy's inaugural ceremony."

"The Free Manâ€|?" Admiral Stephen R. Hackett questioned, dubiously, with a peculiarly furrowed brow.

"Yes sirâ€|" Hackett's assistant maintained. "I'm afraid I don't really know who they're talking about, but I'll look into it... Oh, and speaking of the vortigaunts-" He started again. "-they send their thanks for sending a clean-up crew to recover the dead Reaper from their homeworld."

"Wait a minute, clean-up crewâ€|?" Hackett reiterated, with a tinge of concern and suspicion in his voice, as he stopped cold, and turned to face his assistant. "I don't remember dispatching a clean-up crew

to recov-

Bleep. Bleep. The Admiral was suddenly interrupted by the sound of his omni-tool, and an orange, flashing beacon on the back of his hand, indicating he was receiving an incoming call. Bleep. Bleep.

"Just a moment." He asserted, as he raised his omni-tool to his face, and answered. "Hackett."

"Admiral Hackett, sir!" The female operator on the other end cordially began, with a respectful salute. "I have a priority transmission for you, from Commander Shepard."

"Shepard?! Put him through!"

* * *

><p>The static laced screen on the bridge began to take shape again, as a figure appeared out of the snowy haze.<p>

"Commander!" Hackett greeted, with genuine delight, and a broad grin, when he saw Shepard's face. "I wasn't expecting to hear from you again, so soon. I thought the last time we spoke, I ordered you and your crew to take a long, relaxing vacation!" He said, chuckling with a crooked smirk. "I hope you're not disregarding my orders, son."

"No sir, not at all." The Commander assured in a stoic, deadpan tone, as he stood at attention, with his hands behind his back. "As a matter of fact, that's what this transmission is about."

"Ah, good, good!" Hackett genially replied - the magnitude of the situation not yet donning on him. "So! How goes the cruise?" Suddenly, he stopped and narrowed his eyes discerningly, as he took notice of the gun belt around Shepard's waist, the tattered state of his once opulent clothing, and the dried streak of blood running down the side of his face. "Good lord, you're bleeding! What's happened to you?"

"This ship's been comprised, Admiral." Shepard declared, with great gravitas. "Hijacked!"

"Hijacked?!" The Admiral's eyes flew open, with alarm and disbelief, at the shocking disclosure. Had it been any other person speaking to him, he might have been inclined to take it as a joke.

"Yes sir." The Commander began to explain. "At approximately twenty-one hundred hours, the Carmenta Illustria was boarded and seized by an unknown number of assailants."

"Do you know who they are?!" Hackett pressingly questioned. "Pirates? Slavers?"

"I can't say for certain, sir... But I can tell you that the majority of the ship's security outfit has gone rogue, and is in on the operation."

"The ship's own security?!"

"Yes sirâ€|" Shepard acknowledged, with a stern nod, before continuing. "I've also ascertained information of Blood Pack involvement, but I can't say to what extentâ€|"

"Saints almightyâ€|!" Hackett exclaimed, with a damning shake of his head, and a look of anger and frustration growing in his eyes. "Is the ENTIRE security force part of thisâ€|?!"

"It looks that way, sirâ€|"

Just then, the Admiral stopped. He turned back towards Shepard, and looked at him square on, dissecting his expression with his eyes. "Commanderâ€|" He started, in an uneasy, reluctant tone, as he furrowed his brow. "â€|Are you, yourself, currently being held prisoner?"

"No, sir." John pointedly assured. "But most of my crew isâ€|"

"Understood." He acknowledged, with subtle, relieved, nod. "And what about casualties? Can you speculate on the condition of the other passengers?"

"As far as we know; most, if not all of the passengers are safe." Shepard explained. "We've seen them rounded up, and gathered into a single deck. But I can't say, for sure, whether or not any casualties have been sustainedâ€|"

"Alrightâ€|" Hackett acknowledged, breathing at least a miniscule sigh of relief. His eyes turned listlessly towards the ground, as he tapped his fingertips against his chin, pensively. "Do you have any idea of the ship's intended destinationâ€|?"

"I'mâ€| Not sure, sirâ€|" Shepard declared, in a halting, uncertain voice, as he glanced over expectantly, at Tali.

"Oh, excuse me..." Tali said, as she quickly stood up, and came to stand before the Admiral's projection. "Admiral Hackettâ€|" She began, presenting him with a dignified, human salute. "I'm Tali'Zorah Nar Rayya."

"Yes, of course. Admiral Zorahâ€|" He replied, reciprocating her salute with one of his own, in full regard.

"â€|Admiral?" Tali whispered to herself, in a hushed, and perplexed voice. Meanwhile, Shepard did the same - mouthing the word silently to himself, with a raised eyebrow.

"You must be thinking of my fath- Ngh, never mindâ€|" She abruptly dismissed, with a quick shake of her head, before proceeding. "Anyway, sirâ€| Unfortunately, this ship the hijackers used to board the *Illustria* is a rather antiquated machineâ€| And it wasn't exactly kept in the best of shape. The ship's navigational systems are down - probably knocked out when it docked with the *Illustria*. I'm afraid we're flying blindâ€| I can't say, with any certainty, where we're goingâ€|" She informed, with a dismal shake of her head. "Butâ€| If I had to speculate, I'd say they'll head straight for the nearest Mass Relay." She stated, with conviction, as Hackett listened intently.

"We're currently in the Athena Nebula. Our last location, before the hijackers boarded, was in orbit, above the gas giant Drezaraan, in the Adrimus System. So they'll likely be heading for the Alaeva Relay, in the Parnitha System. If my guess is correctâ€¦" She said in a voice that trailed off, as she brought up her omni-tool for a few quick calculations. "It's roughly aâ€¦ two and a half hour trip, at FTL speeds. And we've been traveling for about an hour and a half nowâ€¦ That would give us about forty-five minutes, to an hour, before we reach the relayâ€¦" She concluded as she looked up, and put her omni-tool away. "That is, of course, if that's where we're actually headedâ€¦"

"Very impressive, Admiral." Hackett bestowed, somewhat taken aback, and mesmerized by the quarians immense knowledge. "That sounds like a very erudite assessment, and the most logical course of actionâ€¦ I'll get the clearance to set up a blockade in front of the Alaeva Relay immediately. But there's one other problemâ€¦" He informed, with a dreary sigh, as he gave a slow, somber shake of his head. "It won't be possible, for us, to stop a ship THAT sizeâ€¦ Not without using forceâ€¦"

"Butâ€¦ Wouldn't a mass effect field inhibitor workâ€¦?" John questioned, as he stepped forward once more.

"M.E.F.I.s are designed to incapacitate things like pirate ships, and black market cargo freighters..." The Admiral started to explain. "The ship you're on now, however, is roughly the size of an Alliance Dreadnoughtâ€¦ I doubt we'd even slow her downâ€¦"

"Shitâ€¦" Shepard uttered silently, to himself, as he bowed and shook his head.

"Hopefully the sight of the blockade will be enoughâ€¦" Hackett added, trying to sound optimistic. "It could deter their advance, and force them to surrenderâ€¦ But if they're desperate, and decide to press on, we'll have no choice but to move aside, and grant them passageâ€¦ or else risk killing everybody on board, in the collisionâ€¦"

"Understood, sirâ€¦" The Commander acknowledged, nodding, and standing up straight, and firm.

"If you can get that ship to remain stationary long enough, we'll get a boarding party to enter and retake it, double-time." Hackett assured. "But know thisâ€¦ If that ship reaches that relay, so long as you traverse Citadel, or Alliance space, we'll go after youâ€¦ But should you cross into the Terminus-" He continued, as his tone grew grim, and foreboding. "-you'll be on your ownâ€¦ There'll be nothing neither I, nor any of the other Citadel governments can doâ€¦ Not if it could risk triggering a war with the Hegemony. Is that understood?"

"Yes sir. Understood."

"In that case, I'm sorry Commander, but I'm officially cutting your liberty pass shortâ€¦" Hackett proclaimed. "I hereby authorize you to do everything and anything within your power to subdue that incursion force, and assure the safe return of that ship, and all its passengers."

"Sir, yes sir." Commander Shepard affirmed, as he stood poised, at attention, and presented his superior a stoic, disciplined salute.

"Alright, thenâ€¦" The haggard old Admiral continued, reciprocating the salute. "Go do what you do best, sonâ€¦ You watch your ass out there. Hackett out."

The Admiral lowered his omni-tool, as the screen faded to static. Wasting no time whatsoever, he turned to his assistant, and took firm hold of his shoulder.

"Listen very carefully." He ordered, as the young officer attentively looked on. "I need you to contact Captain Erin Donaghy on the Orizaba... Get her to rally a squadron, and head to the Parnitha System of the Athena Nebula A-S-A-P. Once she's there, she's to await further orders from me, is that understood?"

"Yes sir, understood."

"Good. Go. Now!" Hackett insisted, with a heavy sense of urgency in his voice, as he turned the young man away, and lightly shoved him along. The duty-bound officer raised his omni-tool, and started punching in keys at a feverish pace, as he bolted off, into the distance.

In the meantime, Admiral Hackett raised his arm back up, and rematerialized his own omni-tool. A few rapid keystrokes, and a small screen appeared, displaying the words "Placing Call" across it. Suddenly, the words faded, and were replaced by the visage of a handsome, seasoned soldier.

"Admiral Hackett, sir." The figure acknowledged, quickly presenting a militaristic salute. "What can I do for you?"

"Major Alenkoâ€¦ How quickly can you get your strike teams together?"

* * *

><p>"Alrightâ€¦" John uttered - exhaling a sigh, as he placed his arms akimbo, on his hips. "The situation may have changed, but the game plan hasn'tâ€¦"<p>

"So we're still going for the bridge, then?" Tali put forth, confident she was in sync with his train of thought.

"That's right. I'M going for the bridge." He sternly asserted, as he stuck his index finger into his own chest. "You and Matthew are staying here."

"I'm not just gonna stay here and hide, John!" The dauntless quarian snapped in refusal. "I'm going with you. We're gonna end this!"

John released a desperate sigh, through his teeth, as he moved in closer to her. "Tali, come onâ€¦" He whispered in a timbre that was pleading, yet forceful, perfectly matching the look in his eyes. "You can't POSSIBLY imagine I'm going to let you come with me, while we have a little boy to look afterâ€¦" He insisted, as he looked down at the timid child, who looked back with a frightened, worried gaze.

"It's too dangerous. Having Matthew here changes thingsâ€|"

"You think I don't know that, John?!" The irritated quarian rebutted. "You think his safety isn't MY priority, too?! But just what do you expect me to do, hmm?! Sit back, hope for the best? They're looking for us, sweeping the ship. It's only a matter of time before they come down hereâ€| Quite frankly I'm surprised it's taken them this long, after all the commotion we kicked up!" She asserted, as her increasingly agitated voice began to escalate from whisper to shout, despite her best efforts to keep it repressed. " And then what happens if they corner us down here, huh? Have you thought of that? Look around youâ€| This is a box! What do you expect me to do? Hold them off with NO combat mods, ONE measly handgun, and ONE spare thermal clip?!"

Shepard ground his teeth the point of breaking them, as his face erupted into an amalgam of emotion; anger, rage, frustration, desperation, confusion, trepidation, and fear - all brewing to the surface, at once. Just then, he turned away, as if not wanting to face the truth, and began pacing around, in small, rapid circles, like a caged animal. His breathing grew heavy, forceful, and shallow. His every breath could be heard, pulsating in and out of his nostrils, like a raging bull.

"Didâ€| Did I do something badâ€|?" Matty beseeched, in a quivering voice, as his chin began to tremble.

"No, kreshaâ€|" Tali immediately consoled, turning around to face the little boy, and crouching down before him. "Of course not. Come hereâ€|" She urged, as she spread her arms, and extended them towards him. Without a second thought, the frightened youth rushed into the safety of Tali's comforting embrace. She scooped him up tight, and held him close, as she stood back up - nestling and cradling him with a fondness, as if he were her own sweet seed. "No, you haven't done anything wrong, okay?"

With Matty in her arms, Tali turned back to the frantic, and wildly restless Commander. As he continued to pace, she reached out with her free hand, and softly laid it upon the side of his face. A gentle caress to soothe the savage beast, as it stopped him cold in his tracks. He looked back up at her, peering into her glistening eyes. There was a hopefulness there. An optimism. But the only things that shone in his were reflections of grief, angst, and dreadâ€|

"Johnâ€|" The quarian beauty began again, in soft-hearted tone. "As long as these people have control of the ship, the safest place for Matty is with usâ€| And the safest thing we can do is what we've been doingâ€| We stay together, and stay covertâ€|"

"And look. If it'll make you feel better, I'll look after Matty. You can do the dirty work." She continued. "But I've always covered your back... Everything we've faced, we faced together. Sarenâ€| The Collectorsâ€| The Reapersâ€| When you stood against that Reaper on Xen, and everyone else ducked for cover in the vort's control room, I was the one outside, standing with youâ€| So what's happened, Johnâ€|? Don't you trust me anymore?"

"Of course I doâ€|" Shepard submitted, as he laid his hand on top of hers, over his cheek. "Butâ€|"

"But, whatâ€¦?" She beckoned, at a loss, with a shake of her head. "Besides, 'Commanderâ€¦'" She continued, with a benign sarcasm ringing in her voice. "I'm technically still on vacationâ€¦ Which means here, I'm not a member of your crew, and I'm entitled to make my own decisionsâ€¦ So if there'll be nothing else sir, I suggest we get to work. Time is a factor, after allâ€¦"

"Hmphâ€¦" Shepard exhaled a defeated chuckle, under his breath, and slowly shook his head. "I never stood a chance, did I?"

"Not a oneâ€¦" Tali casually agreed, with a nonchalant shrug and a roguish smirk.

"Alrightâ€¦" He conceded, with an uneasy sigh. "But I'm doing the dirty work." He asserted, reaffirming the notion with a pointed finger. "Nowâ€¦ The first thing we should do is go through the surveillance feeds, and see if we can map a route, with the least amount of resistance, between here and the bridge."

"Sureâ€¦ Let's see what we can find." The quarian tech expert assured, as she turned and walked back towards the co-pilot's station, with the boy perched on her arms. "I'm gonna put you down, okay little one?"

"Okayâ€¦" Matty acknowledged, as she gently set him back down on the floor, and had a seat.

"Any movement on this deck?"

"No alerts so far." Tali answered John's query, when she quickly took note of the small lettering at the base of the surveillance monitor that read: NO ACTIVITY - followed by a rolling counter displaying the time, and date, down to the millisecond. "None yet, anyway."

"Okay, goodâ€¦ And what about if theyâ€¦ try to hack the surveillance system back from you, or something? Could they do itâ€¦?"

"Oh-ho-hoâ€¦ Don't worry about that." Tali assured, with a devious little chortle, as she went to work, cycling through the feeds. "IF they decide to suddenly get clever, I uploaded a nice, little, hard-headed surprise, to greet them."

"Ah, goodâ€¦" John acknowledged, as he relaxed, and nodded his head. Just then, he stopped, with a befuddled look coming over his face, as he raised a curious eyebrow. "Waitâ€¦ What do you mean by that?"

* * *

><p>Two magnificent, painstakingly hand-carved, wooden doors swung open, and two malevolent, armed and seasoned mercenaries walked through them.<p>

"Whoaâ€¦" Davix uttered, awestruck and captivated, as he beheld the extravagant and ostentatious marvels before his eyes. "Look at this placeâ€¦!"

Directly before them, was a short, rounded flight of steps, which lead into a large, lavish atrium, encompassed in a stone wall of

glistening, running water. At the center of the atrium, sat a meticulously arranged rock garden, within a perfectly tranquil, man-made pond, which surrounded the rock garden, like a moat. Lilly pads floated gently upon the water, and beneath its surface, coy could be observed mingling and coexisting with other, more exotic, more alien species of fish. Beyond that, the brilliantly lustrous, black terrazzo floors led into the dining hall; towering ivory columns with gilded molding, sparkling diamond chandeliers, lush, ruby silk curtains hanging over every archway, and shimmering, white satin table cloths draped over every table. At least the ones that were still standing, as a great many tables along with the chairs, had been knocked over - no doubt a result of the lawless calamity that ensued during the seizure of the ship.

"Damn, rich, bastards. You could feed Tuchanka in this place!" Davix exclaimed, spitefully, as the pair of armed thugs proceeded past the atrium, and into the dining hall.

"So? Anything?" He questioned, turning to Teshya, as they passed the maitre d's vacated podium, and entered the main dining area.

"I'm picking up movement, but it's so hard to track through the walls, like this!" The asari explained, with a heavy sense of grief and frustration in her voice, as she held her omni-tool out, in front of her - waving it aimlessly around, at the walls, floor, and ceiling. "I've never had to track anyone through the ducts before! Hard to tell if they're coming or going, or if they're above us, or below us! It could even be movement on the other decks. It's hard to say!"

"Hmm!" The turian pondered, before simply shrugging it off, and continuing to follow. "So? That Commander Kim's got quite a torch for you, eh?" He posed, with a conniving look in his eye.

"Ugh!" Teshya immediately groaned in disgust, as if having just caught a malodorous whiff of some festering road kill. "Revoltin' piece of human filth!"

"You REALLY hate humans, don't you?" He asked, with a laugh, and a shake of his head.

"I despise them!" The asari earnestly confirmed. "And the ship they flew in on."

Davix grinned, as his eyebrows perked up. "Well, you know what they say!" He started, as nudged Teshya with a light elbow jab, before suddenly breaking out into sour note song. "They all lack charm! They all lack grace! They'll stab your back, and laugh in your face! They'll rob you blind, and leave without a trace! And they call them the members of the human race!"

"Wait, wait, wait!" Gordon insisted, as he halted his forward crawl through the narrow vent shaft, after hearing a faint, rhythmic sound emanating from the outside. "Hold on a second, I hear something!"

"Yeah, I hear it too." Cameron announced, from her place at the rear, as the distant, incomprehensible voices reverberated inside the duct. "Sounds like singing! Bad singing!"

"Shhhâ€|" Miranda hushed, with her eyes turned up, and her ears tuned to the sound.

"Heheheheâ€|!" The two broke out into a mutual, jovial laugh, as Davix finished his little song, with Teshya having joined in, half way through.

Just then, the shady asari looked back down at her motion detecting omni-tool, and noticed that the blip had completely faded away. "Aw, damn it, I lost it againâ€|!" Teshya griped. She raised her omni-tool higher above her head, and spun herself around, as she waved it back and forth, like she were an antenna trying to obtain a signal. Just then, she dashed forward, at a quickened pace, through the luxurious dining room, determined to reacquire the elusive blip, and maintain the pursuit.

"So why DO you hate humans so much, Tesh? Really, I mean." Davix continued to question, as he jogged along behind her, with his assault rifle grasped tightly in his arms.

"I'm pretty sure it was coming from over hereâ€|!" The asari said to herself, more or less heedless to the prying, pestering turian.

"Did a human kill your father, or something?" He asked.

"My fatherâ€|?" The asari reiterated - her attention suddenly garnered, as the two continued along, navigating through the dining hall, and weaving their way past the rows and rows of tables. "No of course notâ€|" She informed, indifferently. "My mother killed my father."

Davix' eyes shot open, and his mouth cracked ajar from the surprising disclosure. Without thinking, he stopped dead in his tracks, reeling from shock, and leaving the asari to continue on ahead without him, while he tried to process what he just heard.

"Whoever it was, I think they're goneâ€|" Gordon surmised, in a whisper, as he did his best to look back over his shoulder.

"We should keep moving." Miranda advised.

"Rightâ€|" The physicist leading them agreed and nodded, as he continued the prone position trek, through the darkness.

"Wait, wait, waitâ€|!" Davix entreated, in disbelief, as he rushed to catch back up with the asari. "Your MOTHER killed your fatherâ€|?!"

"Yeahâ€| I mean it was a few hundred years ago, soâ€| You knowâ€|" The asari merc said, with a nonchalant shrug.

"Wâ€| Wâ€| Why?!" The turian, all at once, stuttered and let out a morbid laugh, as he forced the question out - part of him finding the revelation hilarious, the other part finding it appalling.

"â€|She suspected him of infidelity." Teshya explained, as if it were no big thing, while she made her way towards the right hand side of the dining room - still endeavoring to locate a beacon with her omni-tool.

"Suspectedâ€|!?! Wellâ€| Was he?"

"How should I know?" She scoffed, as she slowly started to turn around, after finding this direction to be utterly unavailing. "She killed them both before we ever found anything outâ€|!" Just then, as she did a complete turnabout, the blip on her screen returned, and began pulsating brighter than ever.

"Tesh, you got a messed up family, you kn-"

"This way!" The asari shouted out, cutting the turian off, and bolting past him, as she drew her sub-machine gun, and headed for the double doors, leading to the kitchen.

POW! The doors swung open, with a resounding slam, as the asari practically flew into the room.

"Wait! Stopâ€|!" Gordon ordered, in a hushed voice, when he suddenly heard the sound, bringing the group to a standstill again. He had just come to a grate in the shaft, when the noise rang out. The barred grating was situated just shy of a four-way junction within the duct, and it provided him a partial bird's eye view of the kitchen below.

"Oh, for the love of the goddess, it's gone againâ€|!" A woman's voice snarled exasperatedly, from below. "I was sure it was coming from around hereâ€|"

With the size and grandeur of the magnificent, adjoined dining hall, the kitchen itself had to be worthy of comparison, and sizeable enough to accommodate its worthy staff. It was a vast, expansive room, with floors of ivory tile, and ovens, countertops, and ventilation hood's of polished stainless-steel. The room's layout was roughly square, in shape, though a tad oblong, and it was more or less the size of a penthouse apartment on the Citadel.

The grandiose galley was divided into aisles by the far reaching, silvery counters - each of which was equipped and stocked with various ingredients, cooking utensils, and appliances. There were three counters on the left, and three on the right, with a large, vacant gap between them, dividing the kitchen in two. The gap most likely served to provide space for easy access and mobility, or perhaps to accommodate a more rotund chef, such as an elcor, should such a thing exist. The counters also ran along the edges of the walls encompassing most of the kitchen. These were the ones equipped with the kitchen sinks, deep fryers, and the built-in tower ovens. The long counter jutting out from the far back wall, beside the rear exit, even had a large column extending into the ceiling. This appeared to be one of the miniature elevators seen in some of the other bars and lounges around the ship, which were used to transport ingredients and supplies back and forth between levels.

Positioned in front of it, at the very center of the spacious gap which divided the kitchen down the middle, was a massive, towering spice rack, resembling a book case. Each shelf was stocked from end to end with a plethora of exotic herbs, spices, and seasonings, of all colors and textures, to elate, scintillate, and exhilarate the taste buds of every species of the galaxy. And nestled into the front and back corners of the left wall, were two large, metallic doors -

no doubt one belonged to the kitchen's walk-in freezer, and the other to the walk-in pantry.

And finally, on the right side of the kitchen, was a different section entirely, which almost seemed to sparkle with a radiant sheen, behind a thick plate glass window. It was the Carmenta Illustria's state-of-the-art clean-room kitchen. It was a miniature sub-section of the larger galley, and a kitchen in-and-of itself, with walls and floors of pristine, spotless white. The glass pane separating it from the rest of the galley was embedded with a glass door, outlined in white so that it was clearly visible. And four tall, glass columns beside the room exhibited four spotless white clean-suits, which very closely resembled nitrite rubber radiation or hazmat suits.

Gordon laid flat, on his stomach, in the air duct. His face was painted in the striped light bleeding in through the grate, and his eyes peered down into the room below, only able to discern a small glimpse of the considerable galley, as if he were looking at it through a keyhole. Just then, a heavily armored turian and asari stepped into the field of his bird's eye view, about ten feet below. He could see the asari pacing around the counters, with her omni-tool aimed up at the walls and ceiling on one hand, and a sub-machine gun brandished in the other.

"What do you see?" Miranda questioned, in a very low whisper.

"An asari and a turian." Gordon answered back, matching her volume, as he turned his head a bit, so his voice would carry towards her. "I think they're looking for us. The asari's got her omni-tool held up to the walls. Looks like she's trying to take some sort of readings or something."

"A motion tracker... Keep perfectly still." Miranda stressed, looking back at the reporter laying prone behind her. "Don't make a move."

"These aren't security guards." Gordon added. "They're wearing armor, and carrying automatic weapons."

"What kind of armor?" Miranda bid, as she did her absolute best to maintain a rigid, motionless state. "What's it look like?"

"Heavy armor. Kinda maroonish in color."

"Is it marked with a white skull anywhere?"

"Yes." Gordon answered, keeping his voice to a minimal whisper. "Big white skull painted on each of the shoulder pads."

"Blood Pack Mercenaries. Just what we need." Miranda uttered, with a disdainful sarcasm. "They're either the ones behind this, or were contracted by the ones who are. We're not exactly equipped to deal with heavily armed mercs right now. It would be in our best interest for us to wait here for a moment, and see if they pass us by."

"Mmm." Davix muttered, enraptured, as he bit into a large, cooked leg of something, left behind on a serving platter. It somewhat resembled the drumstick of an earth turkey, only it was a great deal

larger, almost the size of a violin. The meat had long since cooled down, to the point of being frigid, but this didn't seem to bother him in the slightest. "So'djoo gettin' amything?" The turian questioned, with a muffled mouthful, as he spewed bits and chunks of meat from his mouth.

"Would you quit stuffing your face, and help me?!" The asari ordered, in rebuke. "Come here! Give me a boost."

Davix put the leg of cold meat down, and wiped the excess grease, from his glove, with a stray dishtowel. He strolled over to his asari partner, and collapsed his weapon, before remounting it onto his back. He then hunched over, before her, and tightly interlocked his fingers. Teshya stepped onto the makeshift stepladder of Davix' hands, and rose up, towards the ceiling; nearly bumping her head, as the turian elevated her further than she had expected. She yanked one of the vent gratings off of the ceiling, and aimed her weapon into the cavity. Finding nothing there, but blackened pitch, she warily lifted her head up, into the darkness.

As her head reared into the duct, she swiveled her neck around, from side to side, hoping to spot some sign, or silhouette of their target. But there was nothing to be seen. It was a barren, cramped, metallic crossroads, plagued with dust and choked with darkness. There was no sign of anyone hereâ€|

Little did she know, that just around a blind corner, mere inches away, Gordon laid on his side - pressing himself as tightly as he could to the inside wall, in hopes of evading the inspecting asari's detection.

The war scarred physicist held his breath - making not a sound, as tiny beads of sweat began to dot his brow. He held a hand up to Miranda, urging her to remain perfectly still, as the dogged asari raised her omni-tool, and shined a flashlight into the ducts. This, however, yielded no better results, than her initial search. That's when Cameron's nose started to tickleâ€|

"Anythingâ€|?!" Davix shouted up, towards the asari, as he held her steadily in place.

"Nothingâ€|" Teshya conceded, in defeat, as she pulled her head out of the dark cavity, and leapt off of Davix's hands. "I suppose it could've been movement from one of the decks aboveâ€|"

The three in the vents breathed a collective and silent sigh of relief.

"Oh wellâ€| We'll find him." Davix optimistically assured, as he headed back to the nearby counter, and retrieved the oversized drumstick, picking up where he left off. "So you gonna tell me the real reason you hate humans, yetâ€|?" He asked, with another mouthful, as he leaned back against the counter, eating.

"Keep staying stillâ€|" Gordon whispered, to the two behind him. "It looks like they might be here a whileâ€|"

"I dunnoâ€|" Teshya stated indecisively, as she approached, and leaned on the counter, beside the turian - the two of them obviously seeing this as a good time to take a break. "I don't really have a

REASON for hating them, I guess. I just see 'em as a giant shit stain on the galaxyâ€|"

Davix nodded in acknowledgement, as he continued to chomp away, but he never actually disagreed with her.

"Haven't you ever had an insect, or parasite, or something that you just found to be utterly repulsive, and disgusting, and you just couldn't stand the sight ofâ€|?" She followed up, wrinkling her nose in contempt, with every word.

"Uhmâ€| I dunno, I guess soâ€|"

Just then, as Gordon and Miranda unintentionally eaves dropped on the conversation below, they could both suddenly make out a very rapid, very shallow series of breaths, coming from the very back of the group. It was the kind of sound one makes to herald an impending sneeze.

"Ahâ€| Ahâ€|" Cameron gasped, being as silent as possible, as she scrunched her nose, and began reeling her head further, and further back.

"Don't you dareâ€|!" Miranda commanded, through her teeth, in a throaty whisper, as she looked back, over her shoulder, at the allergy ailed reporter.

A suspicious look came over Davix' face, just then, as he immediately dropped the jumbo drumstick, looked up towards the ceiling, and yanked the hefty assault rifle off his back.

"Whatâ€|?" Teshya beckoned, as she too stepped away from the counter, and drew her own firearm off her hip. "What is it?"

"Thought I heard somethingâ€|"

McClane clenched her eyes shut, and pressed both hands tightly over her nose and mouth. Tear drops flooded from her eyes, and her nose continued to itch, despite the squeeze she was putting on it. She could feel the pressure trying to force its way out. And she actually began to tremble from the exertion it was taking to hold her sneeze in.

Just thenâ€| Just as the tickling surmounted to the peak of eruption - all at once, her nose stopped itching. The tingle was gone, and the compulsion to sneeze had completely faded. Cameron pulled her hands away from her mouth slowly, and cautiously. Like a miracle, the sensation had abated. She looked up at Miranda, and gave her a reassuring nod, letting her know that she was good and there'd be no sneeze. Miranda turned back towards Gordon, and silently passed the notion along. With this, Gordon relaxed a little, and breathed a low sigh of relief. He never even noticed his newly acquired stillson pipe wrench slowly slipping out, from behind his belt.

All of a suddenâ€| PANG! The wrench fell out, and hit the bottom of the metallic duct, with a surprisingly loud thud.

"Ohâ€| Shit!" Gordon griped to himself, as he ground his teeth, and clenched his eyes shut, in anger and frustration.

At that instant, a thunderous, deafening fusillade of gunfire rang out. Gordon instinctively ducked, and clutched his head with his arms, as a trail of holes was drilled into the ventilation shaft intersection - cutting across just in front of him, like a train whizzing by at a railroad crossing.

When the blare of gunfire ceased, Gordon slowly uncovered his head, and looked up. The shaft perpendicular to the one they were in was completely riddled with bullet holes - each one, creating a new pillar of light, shining in from below, and projecting its bright spot, on the duct ceiling.

Suddenly, the entire section of the duct they were in began to rock back and forth, as a shimmering blue glow seemed to radiate from the walls themselves. The shimmer from the walls intensified - erupting into a burning, cerulean colored flame, as they began to crumple in, like an aluminum can being crushed.

"Oh, god! What's happening?!" McClane cried out, in terror, as part of the duct began to tear away from the rest.

"Hold on!" Gordon shouted out, as he pressed his hands against opposite sides of the caving-in vent interior, in a futile attempt to stabilize it, or himself.

At that moment, their entire section of the shaft was ripped away from the rest, and was brought crashing down to the floor, with a vicious, resounding slam, after being torn out of the very ceiling. A thick cloud of dust and debris erupted from the rubble, as bits and pieces of the ceiling continued to fall to the floor, on and around the crumpled section of air duct.

"Heheheâ€|" Davix chuckled odiously, as he crouched down to observe a shadowy figure stirring within the mangled shaft segment. "Well, Teshâ€| I must congratulate you. This looks like quite a catch!"

"Oh, why thank you, Davix. You're too kind!" The asari reciprocated, with an arrogant, exaggerated, graciousness, as she held a glowing hand, engulfed in biotic flame, at her side. "I think I'll crack it open, and see what I've wonâ€|!"

24. Chapter 24: Untouchable Part I

****Salvation: Episode I - The Taking of the Carmenta
Illustria****

Disclaimer: This fan-fiction is part of an episodic series taking place after Salvation: A Half-Life/Mass Effect Universe Fan Fiction, which will lead directly to its sequel, Salvation II: Project Prometheus. These episodes and sequel take place OUTSIDE of the Mass Effect 3 continuity. Characters property of their respective companies, Half-Life created by Valve and Mass Effect created by Bioware.

****Chapter 24: Untouchable (Part I)****

****Dinner and a Show****

Teshya threw her luminescent hand out in front of her, and aimed it at the destroyed segment of air duct, lying on a crumbled bed of debris. A wave of blue energy washed over the ceiling of the mangled shaft, causing it to creak and grind, as it was slowly peeled away, like the aluminum lid of a sardine can. After a few moments, the twisted, metal cover was completely torn off and discarded, leaving the three figures inside exposed, and visible.

"Are you shittin' meâ€|?!" Davix exclaimed, with surprise and dismay, as the figure at the fore rose to an upright, knelt position, within the crumpled duct remains - followed in doing so by the alabaster skinned brunette, behind him. "That ain't Shepard!"

"Greatâ€|!" The asari scorned, with her SMG brandished and aimed at the kneeling trio. "We spent all this time tracking nothing but a pack of worthless, human rajaks!"

Just then, Gordon flinched, as if preparing to charge forward.

"Ah-ahâ€|!" Davix immediately dissuaded, raising his domineering assault rifle, and aiming it at Gordon's head, before he even had a chance to move. "Don't even think about it, Blastoâ€| Put those hands up. Come on, get 'em up! All of you!"

The combatants kneeling in the crumpled shaft saw no other choice, but to comply. They each raised their hands up, besides their heads slowly, and with great reluctance. Their tenderfooted journalist companion followed suit as well, though she trembled in fear, at the frightening sight of the armed aggressors, as she did so.

"Gordonâ€|" Miranda whispered, in the lowest voice possible, with her hands up, by her head. "When I tell you to - duckâ€|"

Without actually turning back, Gordon acknowledged the instruction, with the subtlest of nods.

"And youâ€|" Miranda added, as she turned her head slightly, to address Cameron, behind her. "You STAY down."

"Hey, wait a minuteâ€|" Davix uttered aloud, just then, as he narrowed his eyes and studied the human male before him. And staring back, with a burning gaze, were a pair of cold, jade irises. There was something strange in those eyes of his. It wasn't a look of the fear or the panic that others would be brimming with, but rather a warinessâ€| A cunning.

It would, however, become overtly apparent, before long, that the contemplative turian wasn't studying the intrepid human's eyes at all - but rather, the holographic lenses cloaking them.

Davix released his assault rifle with one hand, and pressed the tips of his fingers against his ear bud communicator. "Davix to bridgeâ€|" He said into his radio, still keeping his weapon fixed, with one arm. "Come in, do you read?"

Back on the bridge, Kargas' eyes gleamed with a blood-thirsty anticipation, as he brought his hand up to his ear, forthwith, and responded. "This is Kargas. I read you." He acknowledged. "What's

your status? Have you found Shepard?"

"Sorry boss, no such luckâ€¦" The turian replied, apologetically, while keeping his eyes fixated on the captives. "But we did manage to snag that other human."

"Other human?" The krogan's voice queried, in his ear. "What other human?"

"The one the volus was talking aboutâ€¦" Davix explained. "You know, the one with the targeting visor, and the patch of fur around his mouthâ€¦ The one he said was just as dangerous as Shepard, pfftâ€¦" He finished, with a snicker.

"Get readyâ€¦" Miranda whispered forward, as she placed her hands behind her head - concealing them from the mercs, as they suddenly lit up, with a blue, biotic shimmer.

"He don't look so dangerous, to me." The turian added, noticeably lowering his guard. "So what do you want us to-"

"Now!" Miranda shouted.

In the blink of an eye, Gordon flung himself forward, onto his stomach, while in a perfectly synchronous motion, Miranda swung her ignited hands out, from behind her head, and aimed one at each of the two armored thugs. The maneuver culminated in a powerful blast of biotic energy, surging out from her hands, and slamming against each of the aggressors, like a tidal wave.

"UMPH!" "HUAH!" They each grunted, and groaned, as they were immediately swept off their feet, and sent hurtling back. The forceful pulse slammed them hard against a wall-mounted counter, knocked them to the ground, and sent their firearms flying out of their hands, and sliding across the floor.

"Davixâ€¦? Davix, come in!" The krogan's voice buzzed in the turian's dazed and ringing ear. "You cut off. What's your situation? Report!"

Gordon and Miranda scrambled to their feet with uncanny haste, as they each targeted one of the laid out firearms as their objectives.

"Get up! They're going for the guns!" Teshya pressingly yelled out, as the two mercs also shot up, off the floor, with near supernatural agility.

Teshya's submachine gun, which was the object of Miranda's desires, had slid towards the front of the kitchen, close to the double doors leading to the dining hall, while Davix' larger assault rifle, which had caught Gordon's eye, had been tossed to the opposite side, towards the interior of the kitchen, between two of the elongated, stainless steel counters.

Gordon vaulted over one of them, in a fevered dash, trying to reach the rifle, when he was suddenly met by the charging turian, in a mad blitz tackle. The blow catapulted the physicist off his feet, and pummeled the wind out of him.

Reciprocally, the instant before Miranda could reach the SMG, she was greeted with a similar biotic blast, to her own - compliments of the adept asari.

"Ugh!" She cried out, as the impactful pulse struck her head on, and sent the gun sliding under a large metallic cabinet near the exit. The shockwave propelled Miranda into the double doors, actually breaking one of them completely off of its hinges, as she careened into it, and went flying into the neighboring room. She landed there, with a bone rattling thud, and went sliding across the terrazzo tiles, strewn upon the broken door, as if it were an Olympic luge.

"Urrgh!" "Hngh!" Gordon and Davix grunted and heaved, as they rolled onto the floor, punching and raking, and grappling, with deadly intent. In the midst of their violent struggle, the nearby assault rifle was kicked away by their flailing feet, and sent sliding under the counter, across the marble tiled floor, before coming to a rest a few feet shy of the torn-out ventilation shaft segment, where the timid journalist slowly raised her head, and peeked out.

"You handle him!" Teshya ordered, with her hands ablaze, as she marched towards the gaping hole, where two swinging doors used to stand - now only one. "The human bitch is mine!"

"With pleasure!" Davix shouted out, in a grunting voice, as he knelt up, yanking Gordon up by the collar with him, only to careen a brutal right hook into his face, thus sending him slamming back down again.

Teshya erupted into the expansive dining hall, and looked down at the abandoned, broken door on the ground, expecting to find a human brunette in a begrimed red dress laid out on top of it. But there was only a door. She clenched her burning hands into fiery fists, and panned her gaze around the room, when suddenly...

"Rargh!" Miranda snarled with gritted teeth, as she broke one of the finely crafted wooden dining chairs across the asari's armored back, with all her might - causing it to shatter, and splinter into several pieces. Taken by complete surprise, the asari combatant was sent lunging forward, stumbling and struggling to maintain her balance. The broken chair left both its legs intact within Miranda's grasp, which she then raised, and wielded as if they were a pair of police batons.

With an icy sneer on her face, she raised the right one above her head and charged headlong, with the asari in her crosshairs. Before she could reach her target, however, the blue skinned femme fatale spun herself around and threw both her blazing hands out in front of her, completely freezing Miranda in place; engulfing her and immobilizing her within a shimmering, blue, biotic envelope.

"Wellâ€¦ Ain't you full of fireâ€¦?" Teshya scoffed, with a wrathful sarcasm, as Miranda struggled, fruitlessly, to break free. Just then, the asari spun herself around, swinging the brunette along with her, as if she were a tetherball. When she about-faced, she reeled her flaming hands back and immediately threw them out again, hard, sending Miranda flying through the air, across the dining hall, and causing her to break through one of the several dinner tables -

smashing it to bits on impact, with a chilling crash.

"Oh, I'm going to enjoy this!" The former Eclipse Sister uttered, as she arrogantly strolled over to the unarmed operative, lying motionlessly on the floor.

"Come 'ere!" Davix shouted, as he rose to his feet, dragging a flailing, swinging Gordon up with him. "Let me show you today's specials!" He bawled, as he swung a savage upper-cut straight into Gordon's face, cracking him on the jaw, and driving him backwards, onto a large, metal dessert trolley.

Gordon toppled over it, falling hard onto his back and head, and knocking the food cart onto its side, with him. Slices of cakes and pies, and bowls of melted mousses, puddings, and ice creams, spilled out from the trolley, blending together into a large, sticky, sugary mess on the floor.

"Hahahaha!" As the turian stood over Gordon, cackling gloatingly at his handiwork, a look of furious resolve overtook the physicist's expression. Gordon used the slippery mangle to slide a short distance away, on his back, before raising both legs and kicking, with all his strength, at the dessert cart - sending it skidding straight into the turian's legs, and sweeping them out, from under him.

"Huamph!" He grunted, as he tumbled over the trolley, onto the floor. Meanwhile, Gordon hastily reached up for the counter, using it to drag himself to his feet, as Davix immediately started to stir. When he regained his vertical state, Gordon noticed a large, clean, cooking skillet resting on the countertop. His eyes narrowed, as he quickly lunged for the handle, and snatched it up.

"Oh-ho!" You're one of them tricky humans, ain't ya?!" By the time Gordon turned around, the sinisterly marked turian was already back to his feet, poised with his fists out in front, in a fortified, defensive stance. "Come on, pyjak! Let's see what you got!" He taunted, cockily.

"Hmph!" Teshya scoffed, as she stood over the seemingly lifeless Miranda. "Guess you weren't as tough as I thought."

All of a sudden, Miranda's right hand sprang to life, as it ignited and extended out towards a round dinner table, of modest size, a short distance away. As if being roped with an invisible lariat, the table slingshotted over to the asari and careened into her side with the immense force and velocity of a big rig truck. The impact shattered the table against the asari's body, and sent her tottering, tumbling, and flopping onto the floor, like a stray tumble weed. Meanwhile, Miranda conversely staggered to her feet - breathing heavily, with her hands aglow, and her strength ebbing fast.

It didn't take long for Teshya to try and shake the cobwebs out, and start clambering back to an upright footing. But as she did so, Miranda took quick notice of one of the several crystalline chandeliers hanging in the lofty dining hall - that is to say, the one suspended just above the asari's head. The human biotic took aim; raising her feebly trembling hands towards the chandelier, and engulfing it in a cerulean fire. Utilizing a single, rigid, jerking motion, she tore the fixture clean off of the ceiling, and brought it

crashing down, onto the armored mercenary, just as she wobbled to her feet.

Teshya looked up, just in time to see the mass of crystal and silver come plunging down on top of her, like a fly swatter. Instinctively, she shielded her face with her hands and attempted to generate a biotic barrier, a split second before the fixture could hit. But she was only partially successful in doing so.

Splat! The clinking, jingling sound of the crystal glass barrage, along with the booming, thunderous thump of steel against stone rattled together, as the blunt of the object found its mark, laying the mercenary out with about sixty pounds of silver and crystal on her chest.

"Mmmmmrrrâ€|" Teshya's voice creaked in pain, within her throat, as she writhed languidly on the floor, somehow clinging to a disoriented state of consciousness.

Meanwhile, the glow from Miranda's quivering hands faded, as she panted, and heaved exhausted breaths, in droves. Just then, the room seemed to cant and spin around her, as it faded to darkness. The woozy biotic clutched at her swimming head, trying to regain her composure, when her equilibrium suddenly gave out, buckling her knees, and causing her to collapse down, to all fours.

Gordon brandished the silver cooking skillet at Davix, in his right hand, as if he were threatening him with a knife. With a sudden jolt, the turian kicked the knocked over dessert trolley towards Gordon, like a speeding soccer ball, forcing the wary physicist to rapidly dodge out of the way, and giving Davix the split-second opportunity to rush in.

Seeing this, Gordon cocked the skillet back, over his head, and immediately swung it down, with considerable strength. Only it never came down... The turian blocked Gordon's right wrist, with his left forearm, and simultaneously careened his right hand into Gordon's chin, with a glancing right cross. Wasting not a single motion, Davix then ran his right hand towards the back of the physicist's neck, and shoulder - clutching it, while agonizingly twisting the weaponized skillet out of Gordon's grasp.

"Argh!" Freeman cried out, in pain, as the skillet hit the floor, with a loud pang. The seasoned turian then proceeded to yank the captive Doctor forward and down, while concurrently bringing his right knee up, and ramming a series of harrowing, gut-wrenching strikes, straight up, into his abdomen.

"Umph! Uuah! Aurgh!" Each blow was announced by a grunting, anguished, cough, before the final knee found its mark at the center of Gordon's chest, flinging him back upright, and sending him smashing down, to the ground, back first.

All this, within the span of about three secondsâ€|

"Hmphâ€| You know, I really don't see itâ€|" Davix said gloatingly, as he stood over Gordon, looking down with an air of vainglorious arrogance about him. "The volus said you were to be considered just as dangerous as Shepard, butâ€| I REALLY think he would've put up more of a fight."

The pain riddled scientist clutched at his chest and midsection, as he quickly shuffled over, onto his stomach and began clawing away at the ground, desperately trying to gain some distance.

"I mean, look at you! You're nothing but a wimp! A pushover! Literally!"

The words ignited an emerald fire in Gordon's eyes, like a spark to hay, as he ground his teeth, and furrowed his brow with rage and contempt. And those burning eyes of his zeroed in on something in the corner, just then. A baking peel; which was essentially a large, flat, metal blade attached to a long, wooden handle, and used to load breads, pizzas, pastries and other similar baked goods into and out of the ovens. The large utensil was reclined vertically, near one of the several massive ranges, like a shovel.

With a sudden burst of speed and adrenaline, Gordon lunged for the instrument, like an Olympic sprinter off the starting line. In one blistering fast, synchronous motion, he grabbed the peel by the handle, and shot back up to his feet.

"Oh! Little fight left in you, after all." Davix said, taking a combat stance, as Gordon spun himself around, while clutching the peel in both hands like a fire axe. "Okay, come on then, little man! Show me some fight!"

Gordon furrowed his brow with anger and focus, and charged the armored mercenary, head on. He raised the peel back around his head, like a baseball bat, and took a feral swing - a swing which the agile turian simply ducked under. The dauntless physicist immediately recovered, and swung again, and again - each time tiring a little more and managing to slice through nothing but the air, as the turian effortlessly avoided his every swipe. He danced around like a light-footed boxer, either shuffling from side to side, or simply ducking underneath. And the arrogance on his face - that patronizing, condescending smirk never once dimmed. He was thoroughly enjoying this foray.

On the final swing, Gordon sliced straight downward, as if the peel were a sledgehammer, causing its metal blade to spark when it struck the floor, after his opponent dodged to one side, yet again. This time however, Davix lunged forward, holding down the wooden handle with his left arm, and spinning himself around to deliver a barbarous back elbow straight into Gordon's mouth, with his right. Gordon stumbled backwards, off balance and discombobulated when Davix voluntarily released his hold on the 'weapon', leaving it firmly clutched in Freeman's talon-like grip.

"Care to try again?" Davix beckoned, taunting the physicist over with a cocksure tone of voice, and an expression teeming with hubris. "Come on, hit the turian, win a prize!"

Miranda struggled to her feet, shaking and wobbling all the while. She clutched the sides of her head, in an attempt to get the room to stop spinning, as she tried to catch her breath and steady herself. With her composure nearly regained, and the room more or less stabilized, she looked over at the churning mercenary under the busted heap of crystal and silver. Knowing full well that she had to end this encounter before it went any further, Miranda took a brief

glance around the room, looking for something she could use, to that end. That's when she looked straight down, and spotted the large carving knife, on the floor, at her feet.

She quickly bent down and picked it up by its ivory handle, when she suddenly heard a clinking, jingling sound. She looked up, and what she saw drew a dismal, exasperated sigh from her lips. The destroyed remains of the chandelier cannon ball were suddenly awash in a shimmering, blue fluorescence. It slowly began to rise, straight up, off the ground, before being flung to the side - discarded like a wad of used tissue paper. The asari too then seemed to levitate off the ground, as she rose to a vertical base - her entire body consumed by a sapphire colored blaze, and her eyes burning and pulsating with a biotic fury.

Miranda hung her head, exhaling a drawn-out, weary breath, just as she heard the incensed asari exclaim "Alright! I have had ENOUGH!"

* * *

><p>"It looks like our best chance is to keep to the 'employees only' sections of the ship." John put forth, as he looked over Tali's shoulder, at the grid of surveillance feeds tiled on the screen. "Like the maintenance areas and the back hallways. It seems like those are the areas with the least activity."<p>

"Right." Tali concurred, as she used a sweeping motion of her fingers, to continue to cycle through the various feeds. "And I should be able to get us past most of the locked doors we might encounter, with no problem."

Just then, Shepard squinted a bit, as he noticed a great deal of movement on one of the tiny little camera feeds minimized and tucked away into the background.

"Hey, look there." He said, as he extended his arm, and pointed at the thumbnail sized image. "What is that?"

Noticing the peculiar activity for herself, Tali's fingers swept across the screen, bringing the tiny feed forward, and enlarging it to full size.

"That's Gordon!" Shepard immediately exclaimed, in wide-eyed disbelief, when he saw it.

There on the screen, the tenacious physicist held a long, shovel-like instrument clamped within his grasp - swinging it wildly back and forth at an elusive turian, donned in a heavy set of Blood Pack armor, who managed to dodge his every attack with little difficulty, and inordinate skill. The armored turian suddenly swooped in, under Freeman's last swing, to deliver four lightning fast, traumatizing kidney strikes, before pulling back out again.

"Oooh!" Shepard groaned and winced - finding the images hard to watch, as Gordon's spine arched back, in agony. "Damn it, that turian looks versed in hand-to-hand! He's never going to get anywhere, that way. Come on Gordon, move! This should be easy for you!"

"Lookâ€|!" Tali interjected, just then, as she noticed another neighboring feed, tucked into the background, flaring up with multiple blasts of blinding, blue light. A few swift finger swipes, and the image floated forward, coming to rest directly underneath the visage of Gordon's encounter, in a horizontal split screen.

"Mirandaâ€|" The Commander uttered, with a profound sense of concern in his voice, as he and Tali watched the nimble operative sprint across the dining hall, with an armored asari firing wave after deadly wave of biotic blasts in her direction. It was almost as though Miranda were one of those little, tin ducks, with a target painted on her side, breezing by on a track at a carnival shooting game.

"Damn itâ€|!" He gulped and said, in a hushed voice. "She's no match for a biotic like that, without her ampâ€|"

"Who's thatâ€|?" Matty inquisitively asked, from his spot behind the couple, as he tried to peer around them for a better look at what had them so enthralled.

Shepard's eyes darted back and forth a bit, as a nervous look grew on his face.

"I-it-it's nothing, Matthewâ€|" He began, somewhat tongue-tied, without actually turning around to face the boy. "It's nobody. Justâ€| something important Tali and I need to look at. Don't worry."

As he got the last word out, he and Tali shared an uneasy glance, as they both turned back to the screen, and watched with fearful apprehension.

* * *

><p>Gordon started to pant and sweat, as his movements grew labored, and his old aches began to hurt. But even still, his furious succession of wayward swings persisted, as he was determined to subdue his slippery nemesis. He followed the evasive turian down a long aisle, between two counters, towards the rear of the galley; knocking spices, and utensils, and cookware off of countertops, and bashing everything in sight, but his target.<p>

"Okay, that's enough of that!" Davix declared, as he sprang into action, while Gordon made his next, and final downward swing. The accomplished turian combatant lunged forward, grabbing the wooden handlebar with a firm, two-handed grip, and holding it down. Utilizing a rigid, twisting motion, as if he were rowing a boat, he then wrenched the peel within Gordon's grasp, causing his arms to contort, and spinning him around, as he tried to hold on. With the human's back to him, and the lengthy peel firmly in his hands, Davix yanked the handlebar bar up to Gordon's neck, and bridged it tightly across his throat - hoisting him backwards in a constricting choke.

"Ugh-ack!" Gordon coughed, gagged, and gasped, with his eyes wide open, in alarm, as his airways were suddenly restricted. He tried to wedge his fingers between his neck and the thick handlebar, in a desperate attempt at prying it off, but the deadly squeeze was far

too tight. He began rocking and flailing back and forth, and swiveling from side to side, in a madcap venture at shaking the turian off, as his eyes began to dim. But his aggressor clung on, as if he were welded onto the struggling human's back.

In a last stitch effort, the desperate physicist actually flung himself onto the nearby countertop, and rolled himself, and the assailing mercenary along with him, over it, to the other side. His hopes were that the maneuver would dislodge the turian's cemented grip, and deliver him from certain death. But again, as the two rolled onto the floor, bringing jars, bottles, and cookware crashing down and shattering with them, the relentless attacker's hold remained unbreakable.

"Oh, quit struggling!" Davix yelled out, with a vile laugh, as he dragged Gordon back up to his feet. "The more you struggle, the more this is gonna hurt!"

The valiant scientist fought to keep his eyelids apart, as a darkened shade of blue consumed the pinkish hue on his lips. His asphyxiating breath seared his lungs and his pupils slowly began to roll up into his skull, as his hands flailed around behind his head, languidly and feebly looking for an ear to tear, or an eye to gouge, or anything that would deliver him from this murderous predicament.

"S-s-stop!" A woman's dithered voice yelled out, just then, as Davix felt something press against the side of his head - something cold and firm, that he could feel trembling. The new development forced the assaulting turian to loosen his hold on the peel across Gordon's neck, but only by a tiny margin.

"Augh! Ack! Ekhm!" Gordon coughed and sputtered violently, while simultaneously inhaling and exhaling a rapid series of shallow, gasping breaths, when his lungs were suddenly able to take in air again.

"L-le-let him go!" Cameron ordered, as she stood perpendicularly beside Davix, holding his own hefty assault rifle to his right temple, in her trembling hands. Although, to be fair, it really was more of a quivering, terrified plea, rather than an order.

"McClane, don't!" Gordon shouted out, in a froggy, raspy voice, when he heard her, as he persistently tried to pry the bar away from his throat, and break free of the larger turian's restrain. "Get back!"

"Uh-oh!" Davix remarked with a snide, facetious, cynicism, as he lurched the lengthy peel back, tight enough to keep Gordon writhing and struggling. "Looks like she's got me..." He shouted into his ear. "I guess I better surrender, huh?"

"McClane, look out!"

In a dizzying blur, Davix swung the horizontally positioned baking peel around, off of Gordon's throat, and used the flat, bladed end of the utensil to swat the assault rifle away from his head, with one fluid motion. Virtually in unison with this, he also delivered a jarring heel kick straight into the base of Gordon's spine, arching him backwards, and sending him toppling to the floor, as the sound of gunfire erupted.

The shock of having the weapon knocked away caused Cameron to pull back on the trigger, in a panic. The unexpected recoil of the powerful firearm forced her to blaze an aimless, erratic trail of bullet pocks from the counter, to the wall, straight up to the ceiling, before she felt two strong hands, from behind, suddenly raise the weapon up, pry her finger off of its trigger, and yank it out of her grip.

It all happened so fast. Before she knew it, the gun was gone, and the thundering roar it begat had turned to silence. But she could still hear it clacking behind her. Terrified of what was to come, Cameron shivered, as she slowly turned herself around - her eyes glazed over with tears of dread, as they looked up, just in time to see the butt of the rifle come barreling down, towards her face.

"Unhh!" Cameron exhaled an anguished moan, as she saw a bright flash of red, before everything went black, when she collapsed to the ground, unconscious.

Davix took a proper hold of his rifle, shouldered it, and took aim at the motionless body of the downed reporter. And just as he began to squeeze on the trigger, out of nowhere, he felt a sudden, powerful impact drive into his spine, and propel him forward, with authority. The rifle went flying out of his hands, as Gordon spearheaded him from behind. In the midst of the attack, the stalwart scientist wrapped his arms around the turian's waist, and charged ahead, full speed, with the guise and momentum of a runaway freight train.

Crash! The blare of shattering glass resonated throughout the entire galley, as both men suddenly plowed through the large, thickened, glass pane window separating the sterilized clean-room section, from the rest of the kitchen. They both tumbled onto the floor, hard, with a cascading shower of pulverized glass shards raining down on top of them.

"Keep still, insect!" Teshya snarled, as she unleashed an unrelenting volley of biotic blasts across the dining hall, in an attempt to target and squash the fleeing Miranda. The armored asari clenched her flaming hands into fists and drew them back, for a substantial attack. Just then, she fanned her fingers out, threw her hands forward, and let loose a devastating shockwave of energy that obliterated tables, chairs, and anything else in its path, as it swept across the dining room floor at a blistering rate of speed.

Knowing full well she couldn't escape the impact, Miranda turned her attention to one of the tables, engulfing it in a biotic cocoon, and raising it up in front of her, like a bulwark wall, just as the blue tidal wave collided against it. The force of the oncoming pulse and the resistance of her biotic shielding worked well in cancelling each other out. And just as the table erupted into a million tiny fragments, Miranda was already in the process of hurling the knife she had previously acquired, from behind it, straight towards the asari's face. But generating the barrier had taken much more out of her than she anticipatedâ€¦

The knife, enveloped in a glimmering, blue radiance, sliced through

the air, blade first, like an arrow from a bow. But as it crossed the dining room floor, it seemed to lose momentum and arch downward. As it approached Teshya, the seasoned fighter had only to swat at the slow moving blade, and snatch it out of the air, as the blue glow around it deteriorated into nothing.

"Hmph!" The seasoned asari scoffed, as she skillfully knuckle-rolled the carving knife around her fingers. "That the best you can do?" She queried, unimpressed, as she looked over at Miranda.

The biotic brunette breathed heavily, as she glared a cold, unforgiving look straight through the asari, while trying to keep her hands ablaze at her sides. But like a light bulb on the verge of burning out, the radiant glow around her hands began to flicker and wane. Unable to sustain herself any longer, she collapsed down onto her hands and knees - clutching at her delirious head, with one hand, and trying to regain her composure, as she panted and gasped.

"Hahahaha! Aww, poor little human worm!" Teshya pitilessly cackled and derided, feigning a sarcastic sympathy, as she held the razor sharp blade out in front of her, before levitating it out of her hand, and causing it to float up to her eyelevel. "You don't have a bio-amp, do you?"

"I don't! I don't need an amp, to beat you!" Miranda asserted, in a halting, panting voice, as she raised her head, and locked eyes with Teshya. "Even without one! I'm stronger than most biotics!" She decreed, with a steel-resolve piercing from deep within her lustrous, sapphire eyes.

Teshya looked on with a grimace, as the unyielding, uncompromising woman defiantly rose to one knee, as if to challenge her very mettle. All of a sudden, with a lightning fast thrust of her hand, Teshya sent the hovering knife zipping across the dining room, blade first, with the speed of a tactical missile. Even so, from that distance, Miranda was able to perceive the threat, and react. She immediately snatched up a large, silver platter, laying before her, and held it up, in front of her face, the very instant before the projectile could hit. The improvised shield was able to protect her from the blade, which pierced the silver dish a good five inches, all the way down to the handle. But it was not able to protect her from the blunt force, as the impact threw her back hard, and sent her rolling across the floor.

"Bitch, I was stronger than most biotics, when I was FIVE." Teshya wrathfully berated, as she methodically strolled over to the stirring operative. Like a pair of fiery torches, her eyes suddenly came ablaze - engulfed in a newfound biotic fury, as three small, nearby dinner tables suddenly lifted up off the ground, and began to follow, and orbit around her, as if she were the sun itself!

25. Chapter 25: Untouchable Part II

****Salvation: Episode I - The Taking of the Carmenta
Illustria****

Disclaimer: This fan-fiction is part of an episodic series taking

place after Salvation: A Half-Life/Mass Effect Universe Fan Fiction, which will lead directly to its sequel, Salvation II: Project Prometheus. These episodes and sequel take place OUTSIDE of the Mass Effect 3 continuity. Characters property of their respective companies, Half-Life created by Valve and Mass Effect created by Bioware.

****Chapter 25: Untouchable (Part II)****

****Only Humanâ€|****

"Foreign contaminants detected. Foreign contaminants detected." A monotonous female voice announced, and a holographic sign at the back of the room flashed, in bold red letters, as a light, foggy mist, began to wash down on Davix and Gordon, from some sort of atomizing sprinkler system in the ceiling. The vaporous haze was accompanied by an intense, almost blinding, beam of white light, which cascaded back and forth across the room, like the glow from a copy machine. It was a process mirroring the sanitization ritual that occurred within the airlocks of most starships, when wayfaring crew members would return aboard from various, otherworldly treks, sojourns, and expeditions. "Decontamination in progress. All employees are requested to leave the area."

"You little piece of shit!" Davix shouted out, clearly no longer amused, as he pushed himself up, off the bed of glass shards.

Gordon wasted no time in following suit, trying to shake off the ache in his bones, and the sting in his flesh, as he scurried to beat the turian to his feet. This proved quite the racking task however, as despite being on the offensive end of the last attack, Gordon appeared to have suffered the blunt of the trauma, due to lacking the benefit of armor protection, which his nemesis was fortunate enough to be endowed with.

Regardless, as he rose up, he was the first to attack; incorporating a blind, wild, right swing. An offensive the seasoned mercenary easily countered, as he raised his left arm, like a boom gate against the blow, before retaliating with three stinging, pummeling shots of his own, into Gordon's gut.

With the maladroit physicist now hunched over, gasping for breath, after having the air rammed clean out of him, Davix raised his arm, and drilled a sharp, armored elbow straight down, between his shoulder blades.

"Uagh-Ack!" Gordon grunted, groaned, sputtered, and coughed - all with one frightfully dreadful rale, as he plopped down, stomach first, onto the bedding of glass debris.

"Come here, get up!" Davix snarled furiously, as he grabbed a handful of Gordon's hair from the back of his head, and jerked him up to his feet.

"And to think, I was trying to take it easy on you!" He exclaimed, as he raised the exhausted, enfeebled human up before him, almost dangling him by his hair, only to drill a fearsome right jab into his chin. The blow rattled Gordon's entire jaw, and caused him to slam backwards, against the sharp edge of the clean-room counter, before sliding down, and landing seated on the floor, with a bloody mouth,

and a glazed over look in his eye.

Any sense of merriment and jest formerly prevalent in Davix' disposition had long since dissolved, as he bent down, and dug his talon-like fingers into Gordon's nostrils, like a fishhook. "Get up, I said!" He savagely berated, as he yanked up.

"ARRGHH!" The battered Freeman let forth a bellowing, agonizing wail, through his teeth, as he was dragged up to his feet, by his nose.

When he stood upright, Gordon tried lashing out again with a feral haymaker, straight away. But this attempt proved no more successful than his previous pursuits. Davix swung his arm up, intercepting Gordon's wild swing with his cast-iron forearm. And with the same motion and momentum, he twirled his arm about, locking Gordon's limb underneath his armpit, and wrenching his shoulder and elbow upwards, towards the ceiling, in a way that human limbs just aren't meant to bend. Just then, he reached out, locking a pincer-like grip around Gordon's throat, as he pulled him forward, less than an inch from his face, to peer into his pained, yet wrathful green eyes.

"You think you're tough, don't ya, you little prick?!" Davix barked in his face, spraying an insulting deluge of saliva onto him with every word.

Gordon grit his teeth, as he wrapped his one liberated hand around Davix' wrist, attempting to pry the petrified clutch off his throat, while his other arm was slowly bent up, further and further, like a twig on the verge of snapping. But whatever pain he, or any man should have been feeling, was somehow anesthetized by his own brewing rage and ire.

But again, it didn't matter, as all at once Davix released his arm-bar hold and locked Gordon up in a fleeting bear hug. With lightning quickness, the turian instantaneously spun himself around and, utilizing a hip throw, forcefully sent Gordon flying and smashing, with a bone rattling percussion, back into the main section of the galley, through what remained of the clean room's glass pane window...

"Teshya!" A coarse, commanding voice snapped in the Blood Pack asari's ear, as she stood at the center of the dining hall, radiating like a star, with three tables orbiting around her, like planets. "Teshya, come in! Do you read me?! Respond!"

The belligerent mercenary rolled her flaming eyes, as she brought a hand up to her communicator.

"Teshya, what's your situation?! Davix isn't responding to my comms! Where are you?! What's happ-"

Rather than pressing against the small earbud communicator, she turned a tiny dial on it, effectively silencing the bellowing in her ear, as she switched it off.

"Not now, kroganâ€¦!" She muttered to herself, as she watched the pained, hampered movements of her victim with vile anticipation. "I'm working hereâ€¦!"

Miranda slowly rolled onto her stomach, and began trying to push herself up off the ground once more, with the guise of a quivering, decrepit, old woman. She looked to be utterly spentâ€¦

Suddenly and without warning, she dispensed with the ruse, and sprang up, off the ground, making a b-line for her asari adversary. Charging full tilt with her head reared, Miranda scanned the area around her with her arms extended to her sides - snatching up a mishmash assortment of glass, ceramic, and silver plates, platters, and cutlery, with her biotics. The makeshift munitions gravitated towards Miranda, as she stopped a few feet away from Teshya, and unfurled the entire arsenal, full force, directly at her.

Teshya rolled her eyes, indifferent and unimpressed, as two of her tables suddenly flew out, in front of her, on their sides, creating a protective rampart wall, just as the volley of dinnerware came smashing, and crashing against the tabletop surfaces.

Suddenly, and at her command, the third of her three tables whipped over from her left-hand side to her right, and found its mark.

"Uagh!" Miranda cried out, in pain, as she was swatted away to the floor, like a bothersome mosquito, and the knife she wielded, with murderous intent, was sent flying out of her hands. The salvo of tableware was doubtless intended to be a mere diversion, while she'd rush in, around the asari's defenses, and blindside her with a fatal strike. This, of course, did not transpire as she premeditated.

As Miranda rolled onto all fours and obstinately began pushing herself up again, another of the tables gravitating around the asari whipped out, and was sent flying towards the enfeebled brunette. Miranda looked up and instantly raised a glowing hand against the attack, successfully deflecting the projectile, and protecting herself behind a thin, wavering barricade of rippling energy.

By that time, a second table was already veering straight towards her, in rapid succession. It was perhaps purely a reflex action that allowed her to channel all the energy from her previously generated barrier into a concentrated biotic pulse, which she fired straight through the table, causing it crumble and burst into a rainfall of tiny, wooden splinters.

But through the ensuing eruption, the third and final table was already on its way; tumbling through the previous table's fragmentation end over end, like a punted football.

"Arrghâ€¦!" Miranda respired a tormented sound, that was part cry and part scream, as the table crashed down against her, sprawling her across the floor, flat on her back. She wasn't quick to stir, this time. She simply laid there, writhing languidly, in a tormented dazed, like a mortally wounded rabbit, twitching in the throes of deathâ€¦

Gordon lurched forward off of the bed of crackling glass shards - dragging himself across the floor, on his stomach, until he finally reached the nearest counter. A newly opened lesion oozed with blood from somewhere under his frayed, auburn colored head of hair. The fine, crimson stream ran down from above his hairline, and permeated into and around his left eyebrow. His right arm, which was peppered

and flecked with grated abrasions, quivered, as he reached up and latched his fingers onto the countertop ledge.

All he wanted to do at that moment - all he felt he COULD do - was to just lie there, seeking assuagement for his pain stricken body. But something inside kept refusing to give in. Something kept driving him on, as it had on so many occasions in the past. Knowing full well that it was only a matter of time before the next impending offensive would come, he bolstered his grip on the countertop ledge, and began using it to pull himself up.

That's when heard the all too expected sound of glass crunching beneath a hard soled boot, behind him. Davix made a slow, methodical approach, observing the wounded physicist's rare show of tenacity, as he tottered up again. And when Gordon's eyes rose up over the horizon of the countertop edge, he noticed a large, upright, butcher's knife, with its razor tip buried deep into a wooden cutting board, besides a half-diced onion bulb.

Gordon listened for the encroaching footsteps behind him to get just a tiny bit closer. When all of a sudden, rejuvenated by an adrenaline fueled rage, the physicist exploded onto his feet, snatched the knife up by the handle, and swung himself around, in a hundred and eighty degree spin - lashing the knife out with him, as if it were a helicopter blade.

The quick-witted, agile turian jumped back, just as the surgically sharpened steel came slicing towards him - digging a deep, downward, horizontal slash into the chest plate of his burgundy Blood Pack Armor. Gordon brandished the blade defensively, panting, palpitating, and trying to keep his legs from giving out, as he readied himself for another attack.

Davix raised a casual eyebrow, as he looked down at his breastplate and ran his fingers along the newly cut groove in his armor, from his right chest, down to his left hip. Figuring his assailant distracted, Gordon seized the opportunity and rushed in again - this time trying for a forceful, dead-center lunge.

Davix shuffled to one side, with supernatural quickness, letting the inept physicist impale nothing but the air, and bumble ahead forward. Gordon screeched to a stop, and hunkered over; touching one hand to the floor to stabilize himself, recover, and immediately redirect his movements. As he stood back up, he lashed out again, swinging the knife back around, the other way, like a pendulum aimed at the turian face. But this time, as he did so, his arm was suddenly stopped cold. Davix arrested the attack by sidestepping the swipe, and simultaneously clasp ing both his hands around the back of Gordon's armed wrist and forearm. In the very next instant, the versed combatant clamped his hand around Gordon's knuckles, painfully crunching his digits in, and forcibly prying his grip off of the knife.

"MRRGH!" Freeman roared in pain, through his throat, with a look of agony etched on his face. But just before the knife could hit the floor, Gordon clenched his one free fist - the one attached to the end of his left forearm, which was still encased in a silver, metallic cast. With an indignant look on his face and a daunting rapidity, Gordon swung his left arm up and careened, not his fist, but his cast, straight into the side of the turian's smug face. This

action, however, was surprisingly met with a greater and opposite reaction, as the blow suddenly spun Davix around, as if he were a roulette wheel. He came back, full-circle and full force, like an Olympic discus thrower, requiting Gordon's strike with a savage, spinning, back-handed punch of his own.

The next thing Gordon knew, he was flat on his back again, dazed and riddled with pain, with his eyes glazed over in a benumbed, half-conscious, stupor. As the room seemed to spin and pulsate with the beat of his own heart, he starred up at the bright ceiling lights, and at the tall, shadowy figure looming over him, like the fourth pale rider.

As Davix looked down, shaking his head with a look of pity and distaste for his stubborn opponent, he unexpectedly felt something warm running down the side of his chin. He reached his hand up towards his throbbing jaw, and lightly touched the tips of his fingers to the bottom of his mouth. When he pulled his hand away, his armored glove was glazed with the dark-blue blots of his own blood.

Davix sneered, and rubbed his fingers together, evanescent the fluid on his fingers, as he looked down and spat a thick, viscous globule of bloody saliva onto the floor, next to Gordon's face.

"â€|Didn't hurt."

* * *

><p>"Damn it!" Shepard exclaimed, grinding his teeth, and pounding a riled fist into his palm, as he looked at the screen. "He has no idea how to fight!"<p>

"John, what are you talking aboutâ€|?!" Tali queried, utterly perplex, as she sat in the next seat over, keeping Matty company, and trying to keep him distracted from the grisly images on the neighboring screen. "I don't understand. He fought the vorcha and the Reapers with usâ€| He beat those pirates at Exo-Geni. Saved Garrus from the Blue Suns. Not to mention all the stuff you say he did bef-"

"Yes, when he had a gun with himâ€|!" John agitatedly put forth, cutting Tali off, as he continued to watch - wincing more and more, with each passing second. "He's smart, Taliâ€| He's quick, he's adaptable, and he's proficient with firearms... But I don't think the man's ever been in a fist fight in his life. He justâ€| takes wild, aimless swingsâ€|! And he's got too many tells. He's way too easy to predictâ€|"

"â€|What do we do?" Tali beckoned, with a growing sense of urgency in her voice, as she lightly patted the boy's back, trying to keep him reassured, and at ease. But Matty was smart enough to know that something was terribly wrong - the frightened grimace on his face was evidence enough of that.

Just then, Shepard looked down to the second half of the split screen, watching as Miranda slowly started to stir again. The inexorable woman quivered turbulently, as she pushed herself away from the floor. Still huddled over on her hands and knees, she looked up at the supercilious mercenary, and raised a debilitated arm. A

faint, almost imperceptible glow washed over her palm briefly, when a tiny, ebbing wisp of an attack was breathed out, and wafted over toward the asari, floating like so much trash in the breeze. As the diminutive glowing speck lightly kissed the side of the asari's cheek, it quickly dissipated into thin air, like a popped bubble.

The asari shook her head and smirked, as her own hand began radiating with energy, which she then channeled out as a torrential pulse on a collision course with Miranda. The tenacious beauty was instantly swept up, and sent tumbling across the floor like a twill ragdoll, before finally rolling to an inert, paralytic stop.

"My god!" Shepard whispered to himself, in a hushed, horror-stricken voice, as he cringed and shook his head in dismay. "We gotta go. Now!" He asserted, as he switched off the screen, and turned towards the door. Tali nodded, and was quick to follow, swiftly scooping the boy up in her arms, and rushing up beside him.

"They won't last much longer. Neither of them!" John explained, with a determined acrimony on his expression. The couple breezed through the cargo ship at a quickened pace, as Shepard drew his weapon, and checked it - making sure the thermal clip was fresh, and properly loaded into the chamber.

"We need help them." He continued, looking to Tali, as they stepped into the umbilical leading to the neighboring ship. "But, remember! I'M doing the dirty work!"

* * *

><p>Gordon rolled onto his side, with his back to the turian, and his head still somewhat mired and muddled in a dizzy stupor. But as his cognitive faculties began to return, he realized that nothing he was doing was yielding any sort of favorable outcome. His every attack was futile. His every defense, penetrated. Every last tactic he attempted to employ was quickly undone and outmatched by the much more skilled and proficient turian fighter.<p>

"You know, I don't get you, human!" He heard Davix say, just then, with an addled and curious tone. "You got the eyes of a killer. But you fight like a guy who's never thrown a punch in his life."

Gordon tuned his ears to the sounds behind him. He could hear the turian breathing, but nothing more. He wasn't arming himself, he wasn't moving in for the kill, or even for another attack. He was simply waiting! And as the physicist rested there, huddled over on the ground, in pain, his pupils began to flicker, as an idea suddenly crept into his mind. Or perhaps, it was more a memory, than an idea. A memory of an instance when he nearly rammed a certain other veteran turian's head straight into a certain physician's desk...

"That the best you can do?" Gordon mocked, in a raspy, creaky voice, as he rolled onto his stomach, and began pushing himself up once more.

Davix' eyes narrowed, infuriated, as he watched this pitiful little wretch of a human staggering to his feet again, in a defiant show of aspersion, like a blatant slap to the face.

Gordon's legs trembled, as he fought against his knees' insistence to buckle. He tottered a bit, wobbling like a branch in the breeze, when he finally managed an upright footing. He looked up, locking eyes with the turian, and challenging him over with a cold, hard gaze. Freeman took a step back with one foot, planting it firm and perpendicular to the other, as he raised his clenched fists, and fortified his stance. "Come on! I'm still standing!"

An indignant, scornful, sneer overtook the provoked turian's countenance, as he balled his hands into fists, and immediately moved towards Gordon. The keen-eyed physicist watched his movements very carefully - his hands, his legs, his feet - when all of a sudden, it came! Davix swung a rapid, rigid, right out at Gordon, but one doesn't become a legend of human history without having lightning fast reflexes of their own. Gordon swatted at the oncoming arm, unexpectedly snatching the aggressor's wrist, twisting it, and wrenching it backwards, hard, behind the turian's back.

"Argh!" Davix cried out, partially from pain, and partially from surprise, as Gordon shuffled around behind him, with his arm firmly locked back in a painful hold. Suddenly, the physicist swung the turian around, spinning him towards the nearby counter, as he took hold of the back of Davix' armor, at the brim that surrounds his neck and shoulders. Gordon reeled the turian back, by his collar, and proceeded to forcibly thrust his head down, towards the metallic countertop, with all the strength his could muster.

Only! Contact was never made. No matter how hard Gordon pushed, Davix' head refused to budge, as he had planted his free hand on the countertop, using it to ballast himself and block the intended collision. Refusing to give up, Gordon yanked back on the turian's collar again, and once more tried to drive his face straight down, through the metal surface. But the outcome was no different. On the valiant physicist's third attempt, Davix immediately drilled his sharp, pointed elbow back into Gordon's gut repeatedly, while at the same time managing to slip under and out of Gordon's arm lock, reversing the hold in the process.

An excruciating twinge of pain shot into Gordon's entire arm, as the next thing he knew, the turian was behind him. Suddenly, his vision zoomed and blurred as his face was driven down hard, onto the countertop surface. His forehead bounced off, with a chilling thud and unforgiving force, before immediately being drilled in again second time. Then a third, forth, and fifth time, all in rapid succession, for good measure. Gordon seemed to go limp, with a blank, glassy-eyed stare, as Davix released his hold on the back of his collar, allowing him to drop the floor, like a large, dead weight.

As soon as he collapsed, a tiny spark of life shone again, as he immediately clutched his face in his hands, and writhed around weakly, moaning and groaning incoherently, through his throat.

Davix looked down at him, listening to him mutter something profane into his palms, like a babbling drunkard.

"Nice try!"

Teshya raised her illuminated hand out at the incapacitated Miranda.

A shimmering, cerulean glow washed over the rapidly fading brunette, completely wrapping her in a biotic cocoon, and gradually lifting her off the ground. She was propped upright, and brought floating high above Teshya's head, with her arms fully extended to the sides, spread eagle, like some sort of effigy.

With Miranda hovering helplessly above her, Teshya turned to look out at the vast, cavernous, and utterly vacant dining hall.

"Races of the galaxy!" She shouted out, projecting her voice as if she were addressing a crowd of millions. "Tremble, and behold! For the great advent of humanity is come!" Teshya looked out at the barren dining room, as if awaiting some sort of ovation. Just then, the sides of her lips began to quiver and curl up, as if she couldn't hold back a smile. And all of a sudden, it came.

"Pfft-Hahahahahahaha!" Teshya blurted through her lips, and broke out into an unrestrained, tumultuous cackle. She huddled over, holding her stomach, as she laughed, and turned back towards the defenseless floating woman.

"Gimme a break!" She continued, addressing Miranda directly with traces of laughter still in her voice, as she lowered the suspended brunette down to her eyelevel.

"You humans! What makes you so special, huh?" She questioned, as Miranda's half-closed eyes looked up, in a dreary, drowsy daze. "What makes you worthless pack of pyjaks worthy of Council representation so soon? I mean, look at you!" "AHHH!" Miranda cried out in pain at the asari's exclamation, as she fanned her glowing fingers out, causing the biotic field around Miranda to tighten and stretch her out a little further.

"You're nothing!" The ruthless asari continued to berate, while somewhat loosening her biotic hold. "You've got no longevity... No skill, no finesses! You're not as tough as krogan. You're not as disciplined as turians, or as smart as salarians! I mean, don't get me wrong. Asari have got 'em all trumped." She declared, with a cocksure snicker. "We've got the best scientists, the best doctors, the best soldiers!" When she said it, a sly, nefarious look crept onto Teshya's face, as she raised her hand up against Miranda, again.

"Ahh-AHHHH!" The drained, powerless operative screamed in agony, as the force around her tightened again, like a torture rack, causing her to feel as if she were being ripped apart from the inside out. But as quickly as it had started, it stopped.

"Best biotics!" Teshya added, with an odious smile, as Miranda's head drooped lax over her chest.

"Shit, you humans don't even possess any natural biotic ability!" The mercenary continued to disparage, in a hate fueled, bigoted rant.

"The only way a human becomes a biotic is through implants, or freak eezo exposures. But yet here come the lot of you, switching on every Mass Relay you find, acting as if the galaxy's yours, and everyone else owes you something."

When Teshya finished her spiel, she looked up at Miranda, hoping to incite some sort of reaction. A word to the contrary, a gesture of rebellion, something! But Miranda simply floated there, with her

head hung down over her chest. The asari wrinkled her nose in contempt, as she reached in to her biotic envelop, grabbing Miranda by the chin, and lifting her head up, forcing her to make eye contact.

"Your kind makes me sick!" She professed, with utter disgust, as she squeezed the sides of Miranda's jaw. "We asari! We're the thoroughbreds of this galaxy. The alpha-race! Do you know what that makes you? Hmm?" She patronizingly asked, as she forcibly swiveled the drowsy eyed human's head from side to side, to mimic a head shake. "That makes you the mongrels... The mutts! It makes you the most putrid layer of prehistoric kakliosaur shit sitting at the bottom of the deepest, darkest scum pit on Tuchanka!"

"That's what a human is." She emphatically reaffirmed, as she pulled her hand away. When she did so, she expected Miranda's head to fall limp again. But surprisingly it didn't! Miranda inhaled and exhaled a series of deep breaths, burning an indignant look straight through the armored merc, as she spoke.

"I'm! going! to KILL! you!"

Teshya stood there for a moment, silently and pensively eyeing the insolent human with a countenance void of all emotion. Suddenly, her nose shriveled with anger and contempt, as she thrust her hand forward, sending Miranda flying backwards yet again. A thunderous clamor of glass, metal, and wood beating together and breaking apart resonated throughout the dining room, as Miranda crashed straight through the late Captain's refectory table, where she and the rest of Shepard's stalwart crew had dined at a little over twenty-four hours ago. Her impact snapped the long table in twain, like a wafer, causing it to buckle at the center, and forcing all the left-behind dishes and tableware to slide down, on top of her, like a waterfall.

Teshya sneered and shook her head, as she looked on.

"Pathetic!"

"You ready to stay down yet?! Huh?!" Davix chided with a swift, infuriated kick into Gordon's side.

"Oof!" Gordon grunted, trying to cover up, as he squirmed languidly on the floor.

"You fuckin' little shit!" Davix scolded. "Who do you think you're messin' with?!"

"Ackhm!" Gordon coughed from another rigid punt, this time into his stomach.

"I've taken down commandos, and battlemasters, and bounty hunters!" He continued to trounce, while Gordon simply writhed around, sapped of strength, and stunned with pain. "I fought my way out of the Detruero Military Outpost before they could fucking court martial me! What is it you thought you were gonna do, huh!?"

"Umph!" Davix' final piercing kick, which was drilled straight into the center of the defenseless Freeman's chest, left him laid out and

utterly immobile.

"You little human shit stain!"

Quickly growing weary of this game, the seething, veteran mercenary turned his attention away from his incapacitated prey and took a brief, panning glance around the kitchen - looking for an interesting and gratifying way to end this laughably one sided fight. And that's when he spotted one! Leaving the broken-down scientist behind, Davix quickly strolled over to the long, rear counter, jutting out from the back wall, behind the massive spice shelf.

When he reached it, he approached the large, metallic column, extending from the countertop, all the way into the ceiling, with a small, metal door on its side. This was obviously one of the miniature elevators used to send goods, drinks, and ingredients back and forth between the various decks. In an exhibition of near atlas-like strength, Davix dug his long, sharp fingers into the edge of the doorway, and began prying away the metal panel door. Under his power, the metallic door began to fold back like cardboard, before being ripped clean off of the elevator. Davix discarded the bent metal panel, and hunched over, sticking his head into the newly revealed, darkened cavity. He swiveled his head around, and looked up, spotting a large, dark mass about four or five floors above.

"Heh!" He snickered to himself, as he pulled his head back out, and returned his attention towards the writhing physicist. "This'll do nicely."

Wasting no time, Davix marched over to Gordon, bent down, grabbed him by the throat, and yanked him to his feet.

"Come here!" He shouted, with a sense of foreboding in his voice, and a look of insidious glee beaming on his face, as he hauled the unruly scientist towards the back of the galley. Barely even able to stand, Gordon's feet scraped along the ground, as he was carted over to the elongated counter at a point opposite of the elevator. The lengthy, stainless steel countertop led straight into the dark, opened elevator shaft, like a road leading to a tunnel.

"I've ALWAYS wanted to do this!" Davix exclaimed with a morbid, yet child-like enthusiasm about him, as he hoisted Gordon up and laid him out flat on his back, on the countertop. Sensing something malicious was afoot, Gordon desperately tried to summon a flurry of strength and fight against his assailant. He punched, and pushed, and thrashed in any way that he could, but this was only met with a cruel series of pacifying body shots. With his victim more or less neutralized, Davix took a firm hold of Gordon's collar and belt and charged forward, at full-speed, sliding Gordon across the countertop with him, like a bulldozer, and using his head to plow into a myriad of various bottles, containers, and assorted cookware.

"Ahh!" Freeman cried out, as a sharp, throbbing pain shot into each of his collar bones, when his shoulders collided against the outside edges of the elevator, bringing him to an abrupt halt. The white fluorescence of the bright kitchen lighting quickly faded to darkness, as his head was rammed into the small, shadowy shaft, leaving the indigo glow radiating from his targeting visor the only remaining illumination.

Davix pulled one hand off of Gordon's throat, and used it to quickly press the down button on the small elevator control panel, before immediately returning it to his neck, and forcibly pinning him down. As a whirring hum began to resonate within the narrow shaft, Gordon eyes widened with dread, when he suddenly noticed the large, square shaped mass descending straight down, on top of his head - A mass that would surely decapitate him, if he could not escape this precarious ordeal in a matter of secondsâ€¦

Teshya circled around the felled Miranda with the semblance of a vulture, or a hungry shark, as she looked down with disgust, though admittedly pleased with her handy work. Just then, she stopped, pressed the edges of her blazing hands together, side by side, and performed a prying, separating motion. As if she were parting the Red Sea, her gesture split the two snapped table halves apart, and propelled them away, along with the remnant table clutter. The only thing left there now, where the Captain's Table used to sit, was a vulnerable and exposed Miranda, lying helplessly on the floor, in a benumbed state of consciousness.

"Hmphâ€¦" The asari chortled under her breath, as a sinister idea popped into her demented head. She took a quick glance around, and spotted an ivory-handled, serrated steak knife on the floor, a few feet to her right. Without even having to move towards it, she simply extended her hand, summoning it over with a blue wave of energy. When it flew into her grasp, Teshya kicked Miranda off her back, and rolled her onto her stomach. She then stepped over Miranda, planting both her feet, on either side of the human's hips, before squatting down on top of her, knife in hand.

"Ahhh!" Miranda cried out, in pain, as the asari grabbed a handful of her silky, raven hair, and yanked back hard - pulling her head up, off the floor, and arching her neck and spine back.

"You got a real pretty head'a hair, insect." Teshya leaned forward and whispered into her ear, as she drew the knife before Miranda's eyes. "It's gonna look even prettier once I've carved it off your skull..."

26. Chapter 26: Untouchable Part III

****Salvation: Episode I - The Taking of the Carmenta
Illustria****

Disclaimer: This fan-fiction is part of an episodic series taking place after Salvation: A Half-Life/Mass Effect Universe Fan Fiction, which will lead directly to its sequel, Salvation II: Project Prometheus. These episodes and sequel take place OUTSIDE of the Mass Effect 3 continuity. Characters property of their respective companies, Half-Life created by Valve and Mass Effect created by Bioware.

****Chapter 26: Untouchable (Part III)****

****The Rage and the Quietus****

"Watch your head!" Davix snidely jeered, as he continued to hold the thrashing human down.

Gordon watched, in a panicked state, as the elevator came plunging down, towards his face. He tried desperately to pry the powerful turian's arms off his neck and shoulders, but they proved immovable. In rapid need of another strategy, he tried throwing a few feeble punches up at his assailant's face. But with the turian's cast-iron arms blocking his movements from the position he was laid out in, coupled with his weakened, exhausted state, this proved to be of little benefit. Suddenly, as Gordon tried pushing against Davix' face and jaw in a desperate, fevered pitch, a message flashed across the heads-up display of his targeting visor, in bright, blinking red letters.

PROXIMITY ALERT - HAZARDOUS MASS DETECTED.

MOVE NOW TO AVOID IMMINENT DECAPITATION.

As the elevator car loomed ominously above, only about two floors up now, Gordon moved his hands around the turian's face, looking for an eye to gouge, or for flesh to rend and tear. What he found instead was Davix' two protruding mandibles, on either side of his jaw. As the elevator came slicing down, just about a foot and a half away from his face, and closing in fast, the desperate physicist took hold of the two jutting appendages, as if they were bicycle handlebars, and with all his might, began prying them apart.

"ARRRGHHHH!" Davix cried out in tormented agony, as he felt the flesh at the sides of his jaw begin to rip. He swiftly and instinctively yanked himself back, pulling Gordon up, along with him, just as the elevator slammed into place. It did manage to clamp down and snag a small clump of Gordon's dark brown hair, from the rear of his head. But this didn't seem to faze him in the slightest, as the only thing he was concerned with, was clinging on to those alien extremities like a lock jawed pit-bull.

"OWW! OWW! AHHH! LET GO! LET GO! LET GO!" Davix screamed out, in a torturous plea, with his eyes clenched shut, in anguish, as Gordon mercilessly continued to pry his mandibles apart, as if he were trying to split the turian himself in two.

The seasoned mercenary flapped his hands about, overwhelmed with unbearable pain, before his training suddenly took over again. It was perhaps instinct, and instinct alone that compelled him to interlock his arms, at the wrist, above Gordon's, and thrust them downward; breaking the human's pincer-like hold, and clamping Freeman's forearms down against his own armored chest.

With his jaw relieved and Gordon's limbs locked securely in his grasp, Davix spun himself around; swinging the human into the nearby, towering kitchen rack - every shelf of which was packed to the brim with exotic spices, herbs, and seasonings. He collided against it, back first, sending it all crashing to the floor, as the rack toppled over, like a giant domino, with him on top of it. Crash! A resounding racket announced the cloud of spiced, multi-colored dust that was suddenly kicked up when the multitude of glass bottles and jars shattered on impact, with the floor.

Miranda looked up in a daze. Her ears rang, and the blurred room seemed to spin around her, like a top. She wasn't entirely sure of where she was, or what was happening. But a bright, glinting flash

above her head seemed to catch her attention. Her glassy eyes turned up, and watched a long, razor sharp, serrated blade brilliantly gleaming in the light, like a sunray. And as she saw it slowly drawing closer and closer to her forehead, the gravity of the situation immediately came surging back to her. Miranda gasped. Her eyes flew open with terror, as she suddenly snapped out of her stupor, back to a fully conscious state.

The instant before the jagged razor edge could touch her hairline, Miranda reached up, and grabbed the asari's armored wrist. She trembled turbulently, mustering every last bit of strength left in her, just to hold Teshya's arm back. She could actually hear the deranged mercenary laughing over her, as the glinting blade continued to inch towards her scalp.

"Arghhhh!" Miranda let forth a crying moan, as the razor sharp teeth lightly touched the tip of her hairline, and very slowly began to grate into her flesh.

As a tiny droplet of blood leaked out of the diminutive laceration, Miranda's opposite hand was in the process of moving backwards - down towards her hips, and the asari's planted foot.

"Ahh!" She abruptly cried out again, as Teshya yanked her hair back further, as if she were reining in a horse.

At that instant, Miranda grabbed the asari's ankle and yanked it forward as hard as she could, taking Teshya's feet completely out from under her, and causing her to stumble backward and drop the knife; thus ceasing her twisted scalping ritual.

Miranda scuttled forward, grabbing the knife in the process, before rapidly scrambling to her feet. She stood up, panting heavily, as she dabbed her fingers against her stinging forehead. When she pulled them away, an enraged sneer grew on her face, as she saw the light coating of blood, on her fingertips.

"You twisted, psychopathic bitch!" The operative snarled, while the asari took her time getting back up, in no obvious hurry. "You tried to SCALP me?!"

"You know, they say there's one thing ALL krogan fearâ€¦" Teshya said in response, with an indifferent shrug, as she nonchalantly crossed her arms. "â€¦And that's having the brow plates peeled off of their heads. I figured, if something like that could scare a krogan, the same thing would work fairly well on ANY species. So far I've been rightâ€¦ Twelve times, heheheâ€¦" She bestowed, with a devious cackle. "You'll be lucky number thirteen."

"â€¦Bitch." Miranda spat the word out, through gritted teeth, as a seething glare brewed to the surface of her countenance. "No oneâ€¦ touches MY hair."

"Hmph, we'll see."

"You dirty fighting mother fucker!" Davix chided, indignantly - holding two fingers to either side of his tightly clenched jaw, as his mandibles flapped back and forth.

While the turian tried to recover, Gordon sat up on the bulgy shelf

edges of the downed rack, vigorously rubbing his eyes, through his holographic lenses. The pungent, seasoned dust, which irritated his eyes and tickled his throat, had started to settle and waft away. But even before he could fully regain his vision, Gordon quickly tried to scramble back to his feet. He pushed himself up against one of the shelves, when his hand suddenly slipped through it, and landed on something firm and bulky on the floor, lying underneath the knocked-over spice case. As Gordon looked down, his red, teary eyes opened wide in astonishment, when he suddenly noticed Davix' hefty, silver, assault rifle. Gordon swiftly shuffled over and, using both hands, tried to pry the weapon out, but it was firmly pinned beneath the shelves of the downed rack. He maneuvered his feet between the shelves, and firmly planted them on the ground to take the weight off of the rack. With the burden lessened, Gordon clamped his hands around the muzzle of the weapon, and began wriggling it back and forth, in a feverish attempt to jar it free.

"Didn't anyone ever tell you, you don't fuck with a turian's mandibles in a fight, pyjak?!" Davix demanded to know, as the throbbing from his jaw started to subside. He turned to look over at Gordon, just in time to see the heedless physicist raising his zest coated assault rifle up, from between the shelves of the massive spice rack. The mercenary's eyes flew open, as he immediately charged in.

Gordon fished the weapon out, by the muzzle, and in the split second it took him to turn and aim it, the contentious turian was already bearing down, on top of him. Davix clawed at the rifle, forcing the barrel up towards the ceiling, as he dove onto Gordon, tackling him back down onto the rack. The two men wrestled with a fury, as they vied for control of the powerful firearm. They tussled and thrashed - rolling around on the hard, bulgy shelf edges of the flat laying kitchen rack.

Davix rolled himself over the audacious human, and mercilessly started pummeling his midsection with a series of rigid knees, as if he were trying to burrow a hole straight through the man.

"Argh!" "Umph!" "OOOF!" Again, and again, the physicist's solar plexus was traumatized, as knee after brutal knee found its mark.

With Gordon already weakened, and fading fast, Davix tore the rifle right out of his grip, and began turning it down towards his head. The length of the weapon, however, gave Gordon the split second chance to put his hands in, and push up against the muzzle of the gun. Even so, with the turian's strength quickly overpowering his own, the barrel continued to creep closer and closer down to Gordon's head.

Miranda inhaled deeply. She could feel her limbs trembling and her heart racing in her chest, as she tried to steady herself. She and Teshya stood motionlessly eying each other from opposite ends of the dining hall, like two dueling gunslingers waiting for the chime of high-noon. Still enervated, Miranda did her best to ignore her pained and fatigued body, as she clenched her hands into fists, and put them out at her sides - igniting them once more into a pair of brilliant, luminescent, azure fireballs.

In a show of one-upmanship, the asari's eyes grew aflame, and the

same cerulean radiance washed over her entire body, transforming her into a walking conduit of pure biotic energy. Wasting no more time, Teshya suddenly took off, without warning - becoming nothing more than a whizzing streak of blue light, racing towards Miranda, with a biotic charge.

Miranda's eyes opened wide. Like a blur, one second the mercenary was nothing but a blaze of light, and the next second she was directly in front of the fair-skinned brunette, delivering a rapid right hook into her face, followed by a left. Miranda was whipped back and forth, before trying to regain her equilibrium, and replying with a flaming, biotic fist of her own. But she swung furiously, and missed - hitting nothing but the air, as Teshya zipped away on a streak of energy. It was only a momentary lapse, as in no time flat the blur of light zoomed in again to deliver another three alternating shots, before zooming back out once more.

The glow from Miranda's fists involuntarily dissipated, as she wobbled around like a punch-drunk boxer on her last legs. Seeing an easy target, Teshya furrowed her brow, and curled her lips into a malicious grin, as she hunkered down, like a football player on a line of scrimmage.

All of a suddenâ€¦ Fwoom! Her biotic charge sent her blazing across the dining hall floor, with the brunette operative in the crosshairs.

"Ummph!" Miranda grunted, as the dead-on blitz sent her flying backwards, before landing, back first, onto the hard, unforgiving, terrazzo floor.

"Hmhmhmhm..." The sinister asari chuckled under her breath, observing her handiwork, as the glow enveloping her body slowly faded away.

But somehow Miranda refused to quitâ€¦ Ever strong-willed and intrepid, she rolled onto her hands and quivered, as she weakly tried to push herself up, off the ground, where conventional wisdom would've dictated that she stay down. The brash, arrogant look on Teshya's face was instantly washed away, and replaced with a look of shock, awe, and disdain.

"Okayâ€¦ You're tough for a little, human, slut. I'll give you thatâ€¦" She said to herself, with a nod of her head, as she slowly started to back away from Miranda - putting a good distance between them. "But let's see how tough you are after I hit your ass with a singularityâ€¦"

The turian aggressor laughed maliciously, as he slowly started to overcome his debilitated human rival. As the aimed barrel of the gun inched down to a spot just above his head, Gordon summoned every last reserve of strength, stamina, and fortitude locked up, deep inside. He released the muzzle of the gun, with his left hand, leaving 100% of the burden, on his right.

"This game is over!" Davix exclaimed in a deranged voice, as the rifle barrel crept down to a spot dangerously close to the peak of the human's skull.

Gordon's free hand skimmed across the floor under the shelves,

searching for something with his fingers. That's when he felt a thick, powdery mound, laced with bits and shards of broken glass. The skilled mercenary slowly started to squeeze back on the trigger, just before the deadly end of the gun could hover over the human's lacerated forehead. Gordon clenched his eyes shut, snatched up a handful of the powdery substance, and all of a suddenâ€¦

"ARGHH! AHH! AHFFF!" The turian let forth a series of harrowing, agonizing wails, when Gordon flung the burning, abrasive dust into his eyes. All at once, Davix released the rifle, and brought both hands up to his face, as he stumbled away, backwards, in a blinded, berserk frenzy.

Inversely, Gordon took firm control of the weapon and scurried forward in a dash, trying to put as much distance between himself, and the adroit turian, as possible. He scampered ahead, and collapsed down into the far corner of the room, where he landed on top of a few stray burlap sacks of fresh ingredients gathered there. One of which split open, and spilled out an avalanche of raw, marble-like legumes.

Gordon clutched the firearm and aimed it out. He panted and wheezed, as he sat in the corner, vigilantly scanning the area with the rifle barrel whipping back and forth, like a sprinkler head. But there was no sign of the turian. Clearly, he had enough presence of mind to know when to retreat. Gordon could hear a faint scampering sound, clear on the opposite side of the kitchen. But with no danger in immediate vicinity, he had no choice but to allow himself a moment to recover.

Freeman cringed and took deep, rapid breaths in droves, as he held his ribs and stomach with one arm, while keeping the assault rifle aimed and balanced on his knee, with the other. He could taste blood pooled in his mouth, and his body was riddled with pain, from his face to his legs, and everything in between. No grave harm had been done to him, at least nothing that would leave any sort of lasting damage - but he had fresh cuts, split stitches, shards of glass and jagged dust embedded into his flesh, and new bruises on top of old onesâ€¦

Meanwhile, on the other side of the kitchen, Davix stumbled about, in blind, feverish daze, as he felt around for something he could use to alleviate the scorching sting in his eyes. His face was marked with the traces of some sort of red powder. It could've been anything from cinnamon to cayenne pepper, to something more alien, and exotic. But whatever the substance was, one thing was certain; it was caustic to the eyes. With his hands waving around at his sides, he suddenly ran into something. As he felt around to see what it was, he could make out a nozzle at the end of a long, curved pipe. He realized, almost immediately, that it must be one of the multiple kitchen sinks in the galley, and his hands quickly explored the region for a means to turn the water on.

The sound of running water snapped Gordon to attention, as he immediately wrapped both hands around the rifle properly, and aimed it out. He waited for some sign of movement, but from his vantage point on the floor, he could hardly make out a thing. He fervently tried to scramble to his feet, but in his haste, he suddenly slipped back down, as his footing was taken out from under him by some of the stray, bead-like legumes that had escaped the ruptured burlap sack

beside him.

"_I'm going about this all wrongâ€¦"_ Gordon thought to himself, as he sat there with his weapon brandished - taking another second to properly appraise the situation. "_I'll never beat himâ€¦| Not like thisâ€¦|"_

Just then, he glanced down at the culprit beads that claimed his footing. As his eyes narrowed, he picked one of them up, and examined it in his hand. It was some sort of strange foodstuff, a bit smaller than a ping-pong ball, but roughly the same round shape. It was pale-yellowish in color, mottled with tiny lavender specs. And it felt dense, heavy and solid. Gordon turned his attention down towards the brown burlap sack that previously housed it, and read the words printed on the outside: 100% Organic - Thessian Grown Estania Beans.

Just then, as he rolled the plump, heavy, little bean, around between his fingers, his emerald pupils began to flutter back and forth rapidly, behind his visorâ€¦|

Miranda staggered to her feet, with her back turned to the ruthless mercenary. As she stood up, her legs buckled under her weight, causing her to collapse down to one knee again. Teshya looked on, shaking her head and waiting with sinister intent, as this perseverant human flea continued to challenge her, rather than just accepting her inevitable fate.

The seemingly invincible asari combatant closed her eyes, and held her right hand out in front of her, palm up. Gradually, she began to conjure every last ounce of biotic energy surging throughout her being, straight into the opened palm. It grew, glowing and pulsating, as it accumulated into a blinding orb of raw, unbridled power. And there she held it, pulsing and resonating like the heartbeat of a god, in the palm of her hand, as she waited for the fair-skinned brunette to reacquire a vertical base.

Once more, Miranda ascended to her feet, in a weary stupor, and slowly began to turn herself around. As she looked up, the last thing she saw was the piercing, vengeful gaze of an asari Blood Pack Mercenary. Teshya flung her hand out in front, sending the pulsating orb of abyssal energy zooming out, straight towards Miranda.

The brilliant sphere of light, with a darkened core, stopped just before making contact with the brunette's chest, and immediately she felt it draw her in, with an immense gravitational field.

"Humph!" Miranda grunted, as she was sucked in towards its center. It froze her there, in place - an irresistible force that she was helpless to fight against. As Miranda suddenly realized what was about to happen, she looked up at Teshya with an appalled and terrified look in her eyes - a look the asari had yet to see. A look that she absolutely reveled in...

"Say goodnight, bitch." Teshya whispered, with a cruel, heartless twinkle in her eyes.

All of a sudden, the dining hall itself seemed to quake, and every item within the once lush room began to rattle, and quiver. The force seemed to grow stronger, just then. Tables and chairs started sliding

across the floor, gravitating towards the source of the pull, before being wholly snatched up and sucked in!

"Argh! Umph! Ungh!" Miranda cried out, again and again, as a salvo of furniture veered into the epicenter of force - repeatedly smashing against her in the process.

"No!" She exclaimed, in a pained, fading voice, with her eyes clenched shut, as she desperately tried to break free. But it was to no avail. "Please, no!"

"Mmmmmmmrrr!" Back in the kitchen, a blonde haired reporter, laid out on the kitchen floor, exhaled a groggy, creaky groan, as her eyelids slowly began to split open. There was a large red knot now prevalent on her forehead, and her head throbbed like nothing she'd ever felt before, as she tried to snap herself back into consciousness. When her eyes opened up, she looked across the blurry floor, as her vision slowly started coming back into focus. Just as it did, a pair of heavy leaden, burgundy, metallic boots stepped into her field of view. She turned to look up. Her eyes opened wide with terror and her mouth split open for a shriek.

"Mmm-mmmph!" Just before the scream could escape her lips, a strong, tri-fingered hand wrapped itself around her mouth, and forcibly dragged her up, to her feet.

Meanwhile, in the far corner of the vast, penthouse-sized kitchen, two jade eyes meticulously scanned the area, as Gordon guardedly rose to his feet - rifle in hand. With the utmost vigilance, and his finger firmly wrapped around the trigger, Gordon held his breath, as his eyes surveyed the galley, in search of any discrepancies or the slightest signs of movement. He could hear a peculiar rumbling sound emanating from the adjoined dining hall, which worried him a great deal, but his pressing problem was the turian, who seemed to vanish without a trace.

Gordon gulped, as he very slowly began to move forward, stepping around the downed shelf, into the main interior of the kitchen, with a very light tread. He spun himself around, in small circles, to assure he wouldn't get caught off guard from behind. But apart from himself, the kitchen appeared to be completely empty.

Without actually looking down at his newly acquired weapon, Gordon adeptly flipped a tiny selector switch on the side, with his thumb. A bright red, holographic light, in the shape of a flaming bullet, lit up above the rifle, indicating he had activated the firearm's incendiary shot mode. He made his way down an aisle, between two of the counters, rotating himself around in all directions, like a slow turning top, with his weapon clutched tightly, and aimed straight out in front, at all times.

The pounding and thundering from the adjacent room continued to grate on his thoughts and apprehensions, as he feared what horrible things could be happening. But he forced himself to subdue his emotions, and keep his senses sharp - for if he let himself get caught off guard now, there'd be nothing he could do, either way.

"_God damn it, where is he?!"_ Gordon shouted out, in his own mind - clenching his teeth to the point of breaking them, as beads of sweat condensed and rolled off his forehead. Just then, he got an idea, as

his keen eyes continued to inspect the area. Stopping for just a moment, he took one hand off the weapon, and brought it to the side of his targeting visor. He summoned a tiny, holographic control panel on the side, and began manipulating it. A short list of visual modes appeared in his heads-up display:

Night Vision

Infrared

Ultraviolet

Motion Tracking

Thermograph

Short Range Sound Navigation and Ranging

Making a quick assessment, he scrolled through the list, landing on thermograph, and selecting it. Suddenly, his field of view was transformed into a blotchy spectrum of dull blues and violets, and radiant oranges and reds. As he looked up, he suddenly found he could now see clear through the kitchen wall, into the dining hall. His jaw fell agape and his eyes pronounced a look of horror, as he observed two feminine figured, orange blotches, against a backdrop of dark blue. One of the figures in the neighboring room showed little movement or signs of life now, as she was seemingly being buried alive, by the other.

"Miranda!" Gordon exclaimed, with a fearful gasp. He clutched the rifle, and started for the exit. But before he could take two steps, he was stopped dead in his tracks, by the sound of a shouting voice.

"Hold it!" Davix hollered, causing Gordon to skid to a stop and swing back around, with his rifle primed.

As Freeman looked on towards the source of the sound, he watched the wooden door to the kitchen's walk-in pantry, nestled in the far back corner of the room, slowly creak open. A pale-faced grimace overtook his expression, as he slowly, and reluctantly, lowered his weapon.

There, at the entryway, stood a quivering Cameron Mclane, frozen in fear, as her eyes pleaded for rescue with a look of unfathomable terror. There was a black, armored glove wrapped around the back of her neck, and a sharp fillet knife pressed against the center of her throat, as an outline of burgundy armor could be made out, standing behind her.

"Help me!" Cameron begged of Gordon, in a shaky, whimpering whisper, as twin tearful rivulets poured from her eyes, and ran down her cheeks. "Please!"

"You're gonna give me that fucking gun-" Davix decreed, as he shoved the blonde haired reporter out of the pantry, from behind, and walked her into the same, long aisle where Gordon was standing. "-right now! Or else, I am going to hack my way through this pretty little thing's throat until I cleave the bone, get the picture?"

Within the once lavish, and exquisitely adorned dining hall, an ex-Cerberus Operative stood at the center, chest deep in debris, as her head hung limp. It didn't take long for every table and every chairâ€¦ every wine glass, and champagne bottleâ€¦ every instrument from the small orchestra's stage, and every chandelier hanging from the ceiling, to be ripped from its proper place, and sent tumbling and hurtling straight towards the unmoving beauty - striking her with a vicious barrage of blows, and continuing to bury her under a mass of furniture, and dinner ware. It didn't seem to be affecting her anymore, though, as a light trickle of blood dripped from her lipâ€¦ Every sadistic blow was just another heinous insult, to an already grievous injury.

Soon came the darknessâ€¦ Everything faded to black, as the porcelain skinned brunette, in a tattered red dress, was completely entombed under a colossal mound of refuse. As the final stray items in the dining hall piled on and the singularity began to lose its strength, the only thing left visible of the valiant operative was a single, soft skinned hand, reaching out of the accumulation, towards the ceiling, like a lonely hand reaching out of the grave, towards the moonlight. It was a grim sight when her outstretched fingers slowly curled back, and her hand fell limp, and lifelessâ€¦

Gordon's eyes kept darting around, with his head constantly turning back towards the exit, when the sounds from the other room seemed to die. And he feared that it wasn't the only thing.

"Hey!" The enraged turian snarled, as he pulled the knife closer to the whimpering, trembling reporter's throat - treacherously using her as a human shield, before him. "Pay attention!" He snapped. "I said give me the gun!"

"You don't have to do this!" Gordon implored, in a shaky voice - fearful of what was happening in the other room, as he raised the rifle again. "Please!"

"Put the gun on the fucking counter, and SLIDE IT OVER TO ME!"

"No. Listen, just let her go!" Freeman pleadingly tried to bargain. "Please! This doesn't have to go any further!"

"Alright then, that does it!"

"Ahhh!" Cameron cried out in pain, as Davix jerked her neck back and sliced a light flesh wound into her skin, with the razor sharp fillet knife.

"No, no, stop! Stop! Stop!" Gordon conceded, as he held the rifle up, and pointed it towards the ceiling. "You win! I'm putting it down, seeâ€¦?" He announced, as he pulled the weapon away from his body, and began lowering it.

"On the counter." The nefarious turian instructed. "Slide it over to me."

Heeding his words with the utmost importance, Gordon laid the rifle flat on the counter, next to a stray frying pan, and a tall glass bottle of red cooking wine. With a swift push, he then did as the aggressor dictated, and sent it sliding across the long, metal countertop, in the turian's direction.

Davix grinned, as he watched the rifle come to a stop, just beside him, with its incendiary fire mode still active. Having no further need of his hostage, he decided to dispense with her, knowing she'd soon be met with the same fate as her human companion, anyway. He gave her a hard, stiff, shove forward, causing her to stumble towards Gordon, while immediately snatching up his assault rifle, and aiming it at the hard to kill physicist.

Gordon reached out, catching Cameron by the shoulders before she could topple to the floor, from the push.

"Oh my god, Dr. Freeman, what do we do?!" She beseeched, in a frightened, whimpering voice, as she stood up beside Gordon, clutching at his arm and shoulder.

"It's alright, just get behind me!" Gordon entreated, as he extended his arms to the sides, forcing Cameron to his rear, and putting himself between her and the sinister turian, like a brick wall. "Whatever happens, just stay behind me."

Unexpectedly, Gordon felt two hands clutch at his shoulders, as McClane took the advice to heart. She clung to him, pressing herself directly to his back. He could feel the trembling of her body, the panicked respirations in her chest, and thunderous, fearful drumming of her heart against his back.

"You put up a good fight, prick. I'll give you that." Davix nonchalantly interjected, as he aimed the barrel of his gun straight up at the bridge of Gordon's nose. "Most people would've stopped getting up after less than HALF of what I did to you. But let's be honest... Even if you managed to get a few shots off, you never would've stood a chance against my armor and k-barriers. So this is the end of the line! Any last words?"

"Don't do this." Gordon sternly put forth, with a slow, calculating shake of his head. "I promise you, you won't win."

His eyes were cold and unafraid, and his brow was clenched as tightly as his fists and chest. This wasn't a frightened request or a plea for mercy he was making. This was an order, plain and simple.

"Pfft!" Davix scoffed and laughed. "You sure you want THOSE to be your last words."

All done with words, Gordon looked over to the counter, and rapidly snatched up the gleaming, silver frying pan he had seen, by the handle.

"Heh!" The turian chuckled, keeping his guard up, and shouldering his rifle, when he saw this. "And just what do you think you're gonna do with THAT?"

He didn't have to ask twice. Without warning, Gordon swung the frying pan, edge first, at the tall, nearby bottle of red cooking wine, shattering it on impact, and causing it to splash and spray wine and glass in the turian's general direction. Davix turned his head away, only slightly - shielding his eyes, but never once averting them, as he was abruptly drenched in the dark red, alcoholic

liquid.

"Grrrâ€|" Davix seemed to growl in his throat, as he looked down at himself, dripping with spirits. Just then he looked back up at Gordon who, for some reason, hadn't made a single solitary effort at neither escaping, nor attacking. Davix scowled, as he shook his head and lined up his sights, coaxing Gordon to wince, and shield his face with the frying pan. The turian gently began to squeeze back on the trigger.

"Lights out, asshole." He uttered, when suddenlyâ€|

BOOM! "ARRGHHH! AHHHH!" A concussive explosion, followed by a harrowing, blood curdling series of wails and screams echoed throughout the kitchen, as Davix' rifle suddenly and inexplicably exploded in his hands, like a frag grenade, without firing a single shot.

The maligned turian's alcohol soaked armor and face ignited. Almost immediately, he was consumed by a massive, scorching fireball, which reached all the way up towards the ceiling. The mercenary at the brightly burning core of this raging inferno flayed and thrashed his arms around wildly. He stumbled about in a violent, panicked frenzy, with his flesh cooking and sizzling from the outside in. To his grave misfortune, his metallic armor actually worked to intensify the dire circumstances - acting like a pressure cooker, and broiling him alive within his own protective shell.

Gordon looked on, simply shaking his head with a pitied look in his eyes, as the turian, engulfed in a raging hellfire conflagration, finally collapsed to the floor, when the ship's fire suppressant system kicked in.

* * *

><p>"Davix! Teshya! Somebody come in!" Kargas persistently bellowed into his radio, but the only response he got was the same as it had been for the past ten minutesâ€| A mocking crackle of static.<p>

"Anythingâ€|?" Kim dubiously questioned, as he looked on.

"No." Kargas asserted, as he shook his head, with a grimace. "No response. Just silenceâ€|"

"We are en voyage towards dire straits, gentlemenâ€|" The stout volus in the Captain's cap nervously announced, with a hissing breath from his respiratory. "Shepard's presence on-board this ship has proved far more troublesome than I initially anticipatedâ€|"

"Hey. I'm sure Davix and Tesh can handle themselves, alright?" The fog-eyed Kim adamantly affirmed, as he briefly glanced down towards Tarrik, before returning his attention to Kargas. "And we don't even know what's going on. Was Shepard alone when they found him? What deck were they on?"

"I don't know what deck." Kargas explained, with a shake of his head. "The comm cut off before I could ask. And it wasn't Shepard at all. It was that other human."

"Other humanâ€|? What other human?"

"That uhâ€| The one your security lackey told us about - with the stuff on his face." The krogan struggled to explain. "The facial fur and the targeting visor."

"Freemanâ€|" Tarrik offered up, in a fearful, foreboding tone.

"Yeah, that's the one. Freeman." Kargas acknowledged. "All they said was that they had him. That they caught him crawling around in the vents, and then I lost radio contactâ€|"

"Oh, I knew it!" Tarrik exclaimed, with a gasp, and a wheeze from his suit, as he restlessly began to pace around in small circles, nervously rubbing his hands together. "Oh, this is bad. This is treachery most foul!"

"Oh, gimme a breakâ€|" Kim grumbled, as he placed his hands on his hips, and rolled his one good eye.

"Suit rat!" Kargas' voice abruptly blared across the bridge, causing Leahr to jump startled in his seat, as the krogan marched up behind him. "Bring up a layout of the ship. Show me the ventilation system!"

"Hey, listen. I'll radio my guys and see if anyone's seen Davix or Tesh anywhere, alright?" The Commander informed, trying to assuage the situation, as he raised his hand to his radio. "But enough with this Gordon Freeman shit, already! This is ridiculous! You're all getting yourselves worked up over some two-hundred year old dead guy! There's no god damned Gordon Freeman on this ship!"

Suddenly, as Leahr worked on fulfilling the krogan's request at the forward terminal, a bright red indicator light began flashing on it.

"What's that?!" Kargas demanded, as he pointed at the crimson marker, labeled: FIRE ALERT. "What is that!?"

Leahr sighed. "It's a fire alarmâ€|"

* * *

><p>Several thick jets of vapor, like the breaths from numerous fire extinguishers, came spurting out from various nozzles embedded in the kitchen ceiling, filling the room with a thick, cloudy haze, as they finished smothering the last of the flames.<p>

"Vision Impairment Detected." The heads-up display in Gordon's visor exhibited, as his visual mode readjusted itself. "Short-range sound navigation and ranging engaged."

Before his eyes, Gordon's outlook faded from a zero-visibility smoke screen, into a clearly perceptible, virtual world of dull grays, and brightly pulsating whites. It was almost as though he were looking at the world in the form of a black and white photograph negative. In addition to this, Gordon could almost make out a peculiar beeping sound emanating from his visor. It was barely audible, almost like the subtle, high-frequency buzz given off by twentieth-century

televisions when they were left switched on, with no incoming signal. But it was definitely there.

Behind him, Cameron stood frozen in time, desperately trying to make sense of what just happened. She looked on, speechless and aghast, with her eyes split open and her mouth hanging agape in shock, awe, and confusion.

Without the slightest hint of surprise on his own face, Gordon simply turned back and stepped around her, leaving her there, as he headed down the aisle towards a large, metallic cabinet pushed flush against the front wall. When he reached the cabinet, he grunted as he pressed his shoulder against it and started to shove it out of the way. It was either heavier than it looked or, more likely than that, he was more spent than he'd ever let on. After a moderately taxing effort, the cabinet slid out of the way, revealing Teshya's submachine gun, which he had previously spied sliding underneath.

He bent down to pick up the gun, when he suddenly heard a creaky, gravelly, tormented moan.

"Unnnnnnggghhhâ€¦".

His eyes grew angry and keen once more, as he raised the weapon, and flicked the safety off. Gordon walked back to his previous place, where Cameron was still standing, and continued on past her. The thick fog lingering within the kitchen was already starting to abate, as he reached the end of the counter, finding an outstretched pair of charred legs. Turning the corner around the counter, Gordon aimed his submachine gun down, as he came upon the rest of Davix' body. When he did so, his anger and apprehension quickly melted into pity and clemency, as he slowly lowered the pointed weapon.

There, strewn across the kitchen floor, on his back, was the once mighty, bellicose Blood Pack Mercenary; now just a quivering, smoking mass of seared flesh. His armor was scorched and blackened, much like his face, which was charred, blistered, and oozing with blood. Any identifying markings once prevalent on his visage had been burned away, and any distinguishing features were no longer recognizable.

Cameron cautiously walked up, behind Gordon. "Oh my godâ€¦!" She exclaimed into her palms, as she covered her mouth with both hands, in horrified dismay, once she discovered the grisly sight for herself.

"Ughhhâ€¦ Unhhhhâ€¦" The still living turian continued to moan and lament, in torturous agony, as he cracked open his eyes, and looked up at the physicist standing over him. His tongue began smacking within his dry mouth, as he tried to speak.

"Nghâ€¦ Hurtsâ€¦ so muchâ€¦" Davix uttered in a creaky, broken voice that was mired in pain and sorrow, as he struggled to force each individual word out. "Can't moveâ€¦ Hurts to breatheâ€¦" He said, as his breathing rasped and hissed in his throat and chest.

"You uhâ€¦ You must've inhaled the superheated airâ€¦" Gordon tentatively explained, as he bowed his head, and looked away, forlorn. "I'm no MD, butâ€¦ from the sound of your breathing, I'd say it... scorched your lung tissue and burned up your alveoliâ€¦" He

informed, as he looked back into the turian's red, teary eyes, with genuine sorrow reflected in his own. "You're suffocatingâ€¦ Slowlyâ€¦ And I can't help you. It isn't as though I can get you to a Doctorâ€¦ I'm sorryâ€¦ I warned youâ€¦"

"â€¦Do it then." Davix urged, his voice fading further and further away, as he rested his head to the side, trying desperately to find a shred of comfort to ease his excruciated condition. "Don'tâ€¦ leave me to die like thisâ€¦ Finish it... Pleaseâ€¦"

Gordon acceded with a slow, regretful nod. With his lips clenched tightly, he raised his weapon and took aim at the turian's head, preparing to put an end to his suffering. "It won't hurt longâ€¦" He remorsefully consoled.

"Waitâ€¦!" The turian pleaded, as he raised his head back up, and locked eyes with Gordon for a final time. "Firstâ€¦ Who are you?"

Gordon lowered his weapon again, as he searched for the words to give the fallen warrior. "Iâ€¦ I'm just a scientistâ€¦" He declared.

"A scientistâ€¦?!" Davix reiterated in disbelief, with a pained laugh, in a low, coarse voice, as he rested his head back again. "Oh, this is funnyâ€¦ Ugh! ARGHH!" He abruptly twitched and cringed in agony, as a sudden, sharp twinge of pain coursed throughout his entire body. "Do itâ€¦! Quickly, please!"

Gordon raised his weapon, and wrapped his finger tightly around the trigger. "I'm sorry..."

Teshya took a long, slow, stroll around the towering mound of debris now accumulated at the very center of the once lush dining hall, admiring her work. It was a jumbled mountain of splintered wood, shattered glass, mangled silver, and left over delicacies. And near the top, a single porcelain-skinned hand rested lifeless and limp, as a lone gunshot suddenly rang out, from within the kitchen.

"Hmphâ€¦" Teshya released a scoffing laugh, as she stopped, and looked towards the kitchen doors. "Sounds like my partner's finally done dealing with the rest of the human vermin in this place." She proclaimed with a brash tone, as she turned and started towards the doors. "Later, wormâ€¦"

As she began to walk away, a soft-skinned finger behind her started to twitch. Gradually, the rest of the digits became animated, and began to curl and bend. Suddenly, they sprang to life, extending and fanning out, before retracting and clenching into a trembling fist. Teshya stopped and turned around, as a low rumbling began to emanate from the junk pile behind her. When she turned, she was surprised to see the tightly clenched fist, extending from under the mountain of wreckage, suddenly flare up with a blazing, shimmering, indigo flame. It began to tremble and quake more and more violently, just before regressing down into the accumulation of debris.

"Oh-ho, you want some more, do you bitch?!" Teshya chided, as a blue biotic glow washed over her entire body, and radiated from her eyes. "Well, come on! I wasn't through with you yet, anyway!"

The noise from within the agglomeration grew louder and louder,

building from a subtle rumble to a blaring roar. Tables and chairs began to shake and slide off of the mound, and the floor itself seemed to tremor and quake under the asari's feet, as brilliant blue rays of light began to pierce out from the center of the rubbish pile, through the gaps and cracks.

"What theâ€¦?!" Teshya uttered to herself, as she looked around, stunned and baffled, at this frightening phenomenon, which possessed the makings of an imminent natural disaster.

At that very instantâ€¦ Like the unheralded eruption of Vesuvius, every last layer of scrap and debris suddenly exploded from the center with incredible, unprecedented force; flying, scattering, and fragmenting throughout the massive dining hall, in all directions, like the shrapnel from a bomb.

"Hey, argh! Umph! Uagh! Ahhh!" Teshya grunted and wailed, as she was repeatedly pummeled by a brutal fusillade of wreckage. Before she could find cover from the volley, or protect herself from it, she looked up, and managed to catch only the briefest glimpse of the radiant figure, in a tattered red dress, standing in the center. All of a sudden, the glimmering blue being seemed to transform itself into a vessel of pure energy.

Utilizing an unparalleled biotic charge of her own, Miranda blazed straight out towards the asari, as a lightning fast streak of light. She thrust her right hand forward, as she plowed into the mercenary, like a wrecking ball. The sheer force and velocity of the blow should've sent Teshya flying and crashing to the ground. But long before the insolent asari could be hurled away, Miranda caught her - claspng her entire, blue-skinned forehead in a crushing, vice-like biotic grip.

"Argh! Let me go!" Teshya pleaded - her vision blinded by the edge of Miranda's palm, as she felt the human's talon-like fingers digging into her temples. She wrapped her hands around Miranda's wrist in a desperate and futile attempt at peeling her grip off, but it was no use. Suddenly, she felt the pressurized clamp around her forehead pull at her, and actually begin to lift her straight up, off the floor.

"Ahhh! ARGHH! OH GODDESS, LET ME GO!" She cried and begged for mercy, with a profound sense of terror and intimidation teeming in her voice. She felt as though her cranium could cave in at any moment, as her feet flailed and kicked wild, frantic, and helpless.

Miranda stood there; her shimmering hand latched around the asari's skull, like a claw crane, and her eyes glowing and burning with a biotic vengeance, as she watched the mercenary's thrashing grow increasingly feral and desperate. At that moment, a baleful, unforgiving sneer overtook the human's expression. Miranda grit her teeth. She raised the asari up even higher and suddenly thrust forward, bringing her blue head slamming down hard, to the floor, with ruthless, bone shattering force.

"Ackgh!" One last, chilling, death rattle emanated from Teshya's body, as it spasmed and convulsed. Her fringe had split apart on impact, and her skull cracked open, like a ripe honeydew melon being dropped onto a hard, concrete sidewalk. With the deed done, the glow from Miranda's body and hands quickly faded, as the asari's twitching

lessened and went limp.

"Told youâ€¦" Miranda uttered, panting and gasping heavily for air. And with one final, wheezing, gasp, everything went dark. Her eyes rolled back into her forehead, and she suddenly collapsed down, directly besides Teshya's lifeless body, with her hand soaked in her lavender blood.

Gordon condensed the still smoking sub-machine gun back into its compacted form, as he looked down in a pensive, trance-like state at the dead turian lying peacefully, with a dark hole, welled over with blood, drilled into the center of his charred forehead.

"Does it always have to be like thisâ€¦?" He whispered rhetorically to himself, in a low, somber voice.

"Hâ€¦ H-how didâ€¦ Whatâ€¦ What happened to him?!" Cameron finally managed to spit the question out, after a series of stunned sputters, as she stood looking back and forth between Gordon and the fallen mercenary. "Wh-why did he just burst into flames like that?!"

Gordon turned to McClane. "I just-" All of a sudden, he stopped dead midsentence, as a ghastly, pale look came over his expression. "Miranda!" He exclaimed, when he abruptly remembered, as he brushed his way past the reporter, and darted towards the exit.

Freeman threw open the one remaining swinging door, leading from the kitchen, and erupted into the dining room, with his weapon drawn. "Miranda!" He shouted out, with desperation and despair, as his eyes scanned the expansive, ransacked, and destroyed area.

The entire room looked as if a gale force hurricane had swept through it. Bits and pieces of tables and chairs were strewn across the floor. Shreds of tattered white satin table cloths, and ruby silk curtains littered the ground like confetti. And shards of glass crunched under his shoes, as he ran in, looking for some sign of the fair skinned brunette. A sign he suddenly spotted.

"Oh noâ€¦!" He gasped, when he noticed the felled operative laying at the center of the carnage, which surrounded her in an almost crater-like formation. She was sprawled out, on her back, motionless and recumbent, directly besides the mangled body of the second armored Blood Pack Mercenary.

"_Oh, please no! Not again!"_ He shouted in his mind, feeling as though his heart had lodged itself into his throat, as he immediately sprinted over to her. He jumped and vaulted over obstacles, pleading that his fears would not prove true, as his darkest memories revived.

"_Helpâ€¦ Gordonâ€¦ Nggghhhâ€¦!" _

"_The Alyx Vanceâ€¦ But harm has come. Her condition is graveâ€¦!"

—

"_Her heart has stopped! She ebbs! If we lose her, we lose all!"_

"Alyx!" He called out, as he slid to his knees at the operative's side, cradling her head, and raising her up. "Oh no! Oh please, no!"

Say something! Please!"

"Oh my god!" Cameron's shaky voice suddenly cried out, from over his shoulder, as she looked down at the inanimate brunette. "Oh my god, is she-?!"

"No!" Gordon immediately imposed, cutting Cameron off before she could finish, as he watched Miranda's chest lightly contract in and out. "No, she's alive! She's breathing, but I need to find her some! I-I need to get her to a-!"

"Mmmmm!" The restful beauty let forth a groggy, creaky, groan, as her eyes very slowly started to split apart. When she looked up, she could see a blurry figure looming over her - a panicked, distraught figure that quickly came into focus.

"Hey, tough guy!" She greeted, in a dreary, drowsy tone, as she cracked a small smile.

"Hey!" Gordon said, trying to steady his voice, and reciprocating a worried grin, as he looked down at her, and brushed the hair out of her eyes. "Are you! are you alright?!"

"Mmm, I got a few new dents!" She declared, in a coarse, pained voice, as she slowly began to sit up, under her own power. "How 'bout you?" She asked, as she looked over Gordon's newly battered state.

"Heh." He couldn't help himself from exhaling a relieved chuckle. "Yeah, I got a couple new ones!"

"No, no, wait!" He abruptly exclaimed, as the resilient lady tried to push herself up, off the ground, before losing her equilibrium and collapsing back down. "Hold on, Miranda. Don't get up just yet. You should rest!"

"Gordon, we need to go!" The brunette declared in a voice that started to sound sturdy, and more herself, as she tried pushing herself up again. "We need to keep moving! With the fracas we stirred up down here, it'll be a miracle if the entire bloody ship doesn't come to investigate."

Gordon quickly took her hand, and helped her up, as she managed to rise to wobbly legs. Her loyal physicist then took her arm, and draped it around his neck and shoulders, to help steady her. But she stubbornly pulled it away.

"Gordon, I'm fine. Don't worry!" She assured, laying a hand on his chest, as her head continued to throb and spin a bit. "It's mostly just biotic enervation! Really!"

"You're sure?!"

"Yes..." She acknowledged, with warmth and tenderness in her eyes, trying to ease his fears, as a thought suddenly popped into her head. "But that reminds me..." She said, trailing off, as she turned to look down at the maimed asari body, at her feet.

"Mgh!" Gordon muttered wincingly, as he looked down. "Well, she's definitely seen better days."

"But she won't be seeing any more!" The brunette biotic affirmed, as she bent down, turned what remained of the asari's ruptured head to one side, and pushed the blue cartilage of her ear forward.

Concealed behind it was a tiny, crescent shaped chip, about the size of a twentieth century earth nickel. It was seated into a metallic socket, which was embedded into the asari's skull. With her free hand Miranda reached down, pinched the tiny chip, and plucked it out of its small, silvery socket.

Standing back up, she swung her hair out the way, and tilted her head to one side. She then pulled the cartilage of her own right ear forward, with one hand, and carefully inserted the chip into her vacant bio-amp socket, with the other. As soon as it was plugged in, a tiny, blue indicator light on the chip flared up.

"Ooooh, much better!" Miranda declared in an upbeat, almost euphoric tone, as her stature propped up, and a shimmering blue wave of energy washed over her. "Ahh, it feels like a Polaris." She conjectured, as she torqued her neck around, and rotated her shoulders - feeling completely reinvigorated, as the shimmering blue glow around her faded. "The barriers aren't quite so strong, but the shockwaves pack one hell of a punch! And I should know."

"I suppose she won't be needing it." Gordon said modestly, as he looked back down at the expired asari. "Alright, well we should go, then!"

Miranda nodded, as Gordon drew his newly acquired sub-machine gun - keeping it handy, as the three turned and made for the atrium entrance of the dining hall.

"Uh! Uhm, excuse me. I'm sorry, but can I ask?" McClane's uneasy voice chimed in, just then, as she followed along behind the two victorious combatants. "I'm still not 100% clear on exactly what happened to the other one!"

"The other one...?" Miranda reiterated, as she suddenly remembered the 2nd Blood Pack aggressor. "That's right. What happened with the turian?" She queried, as they walked.

"He exploded!" Cameron poignantly put forth, just as Gordon cracked open his mouth, but before a single word could be uttered.

"He exploded?!" Miranda beckoned, with a narrow-eyed look of confusion.

Gordon simply answered by casually shrugging his shoulders and nodding.

"I-I don't understand what happened." Cameron continued, flummoxed. "One minute, he was about to shoot us both, and then the next he just! burst into flames! I mean, I'm not complaining! It was either him or us! But why?"

"Because I sabotaged the gun!" Gordon stoically explained, as they continued on, navigating across the wreckage and debris of what was

once one of the most elegant dining rooms in the galaxy.

"â€|You what?"

"I was no match for that turianâ€|" He proceeded to explain, with a somewhat disconcerted sigh, as he glanced over at Miranda. "I couldn't touch him. And he'd managed to disarm every single thing I tried to use as a weapon. I knew he'd only do the same thing with the rifle, soâ€| I sabotaged it. I obstructed the barrel with something called anâ€| 'Estania Bean'?" He said, questioningly.

"Ew, I hate Estania Beansâ€|!" Cameron accidentally confessed, before her reporters instincts kicked in again, as they neared the atrium entrance. "But, what about if heâ€| didn't disarm you? The gun would've been useless to you, rightâ€|?"

"Well yeah, but then I figured maybe I could use it in a threatening manner to coerce his surrender." Gordon elaborated, with a sigh and a dismal shake of his head, before continuing. "Obviously that's not how things unfolded... I set the rifle's firing mode to incendiary, doused him in a flammable substance, and when he tried to shoot usâ€|"

"Boomâ€|" Miranda added, finishing his sentence for him. Gordon nodded in reply.

"You outsmarted himâ€|" Cameron proclaimed, as she looked at the bruised, bloodied hero before her, with a gleam of admiration, and a little something more, in her eyes.

"It's how he winsâ€|" Miranda proudly declared, as they reached the man-made pond in the center of the atrium, and walked around, towards the doors leading out.

"Hmph, sometimes..." Gordon said, with a subtle laugh, as they continued hobbling along, and started up the short, rounded flight of stairs.

Just then, a peculiar sound seemed to emanate from the outside. All of a sudden, the wooden doors at the top of the stairs flew open, and in marched a small squadron of between twelve to fifteen LOKI mechs, in twin single-file lines.

"HALT." A robotic, monotonous voice from the unit at the head of the group ordered, as Gordon swung his weapon out, and tightened his grip on the trigger. "ARMED CIVILIANS DETECTED. YOU ARE ORD-"

FWOOM! Before the battle scarred physicist could discharge a single shot, a tempestuous tidal wave of raw, unbridled biotic energy slammed against them, with the force of a tsunami, instantly and completely obliterating them, and blowing out a large portion of the dining hall entrance with them.

Gordon looked on, wide eyed and aghast at the incredible display of power, as Miranda grinned an odious grin - her fingers tingling and teeming with energy.

"What was that?!" "Sounded like it came from over here!" "This way!" "You men, with me!" "The six of you, circle round back!" A collage of various, distant voices could be heard coming from multiple

directions, outside - voices that were soon accompanied by the stomping, trampling sound of a forthcoming horde.

"Well, it looks like they know we're hereâ€|" Miranda guardedly informed, as she listened to the noise and looked down at the sparking bits and pieces off the slender, mechanized soldiers. "Maybe a less conspicuous route would prove more accommodatingâ€|"

* * *

><p>Author's Note: Well ladies and gentlemen, it's been a good seven months, but I have FINALLY posted an update to my story. As I've always said, I'm not done. Not by a long shot. I have so many ideas for this fanfic series, and I've really come to love the little shared universe that I've created. I've even got ideas for things BEYOND Salvation II, which is really going to be my swan song story. The ultimate culmination of all events and elements. But seeing as that is years and years away, with the way things have been going, we'll stick to Episode I for now, shall we._

Things are finally heading for the climactic final battle. Only About 2, maybe 3 more chapter clusters to go now, and I'll be done. Oh, and quick retraction here. My episodic stories leading up to Salvation II are no longer Short Stories. I thought they were gonna be short stories, but... I think I'm incapable of writing something like that lol. The villains in this particular story for instance were not going to have any sort of background, or motivating backstory, or anything of that nature. They were originally going to be generic greedy bad guys. And if you've been following along, you see how that's not exactly what I ended up doing. Anyway...

When I first started writing this multi-part fight scene at the end, I was actually REALLY pleased with the way it was turning out. And the reason for that is I decided to experiment a little with my writing style. This isn't the first time I've written 2 or more simultaneous fights occurring at the same time. But in the past, when I've written them, I've sort of written them in a linear fashion, as one large entity. With THESE chapters however, I thought that the fight might be more fluid and organic if I wrote them as two SEPERATE fights, and then just sort of spliced them together. I wrote Miranda's fight first, then I wrote Gordon's.

This, however, had the opposite effect. Rather than being fluid and organic, the pacing of the fights seemed to sort of drag on. And the action got sort of stale and repetative. I also had to shorten some parts for one fight, lengthen parts on others, adjust chronology so things match up better, etc. So I had to work to fix all this. I'm not 100% sure I was able to do it right. I tried, but these fights were not meant to go THIS long. But, I did my best. In the future I'll stick to writing simultaneous fight action as one entity as I've done in the past, rather than writing them seperately and trying to splice them together later.

I'm really hoping you guys will like it. Enjoy, and let me know what you think.

27. Chapter 27: In Search of the Free Man

**Salvation: Episode I - The Taking of the Carmenta

Illustria**

Disclaimer: This fan-fiction is part of an episodic series taking place after Salvation: A Half-Life/Mass Effect Universe Fan Fiction, which will lead directly to its sequel, Salvation II: Project Prometheus. These episodes and sequel take place OUTSIDE of the Mass Effect 3 continuity. Characters property of their respective companies, Half-Life created by Valve and Mass Effect created by Bioware.

Chapter 27: In Search of the Free Man

You three are with me!" A corrupted human security guard ordered, as he clutched his drawn sidearm and sprinted down a long, narrow hallway. "Come on, hurry up!"

Accompanying him were three other equally uniformed, male, turn-coat officers; a salarian, and two turians - one of which was trailing a little farther back than the other, as he struggled to keep up. Each of them followed the human's lead, brandishing their own respective weapons, as they charged down the cramped corridor, which was situated around the outer edge of the Illustria's Mezzanine Deck.

The walls of the corridor, though clean and painted in a none too fetching shade of beige, were fairly non-descript. And the hard, white vinyl flooring they trampled was barren and uncarpeted. Truly the most outstanding feature within this particularly plain hallway of this grandiose ship, was the large red lettering painted intermittently along the inner wall, which read; "Employees Only Area", over and over again.

The repetitive clambering sound of the guards' boots echoed against the confined walls of the long, constricted aisle, as they sprinted down its length, past an opened door, which served as the entrance to one of the many maintenance stairwells on-board. But it was hardly worth paying any mind to at the moment. The human at the helm pressed on forward past it, swiftly followed by the salarian and one of the two turians in tow.

As the latter of the two dextro-dna beings breezed by, the slower turian's weapon hand was suddenly hooked by something lunging out of the opened doorway, like a camouflaged predator springing out of its hideaway to ensnare its prey.

"Hruah!" The turian grunted and gasped, mostly out of sheer shock and surprise, as his arm and shoulder were suddenly jerked up and back, while simultaneously being disarmed.

His abrupt, frightened wail quickly forced his three quicker compatriots to skid to a stop, and spin back around just in time to see the venerable human, Commander John Shepard, wrench the slower turian's pistol out of his grip, and lock him up in a constricting choke-hold.

"Ackgh! Help me!" The turian pleaded in a froggy voice, with a thick arm wrapped around his neck, as he futilely wrestled to get free.

"Holy shit, is that-? That's Commander Shepard!" The human security

guard abruptly exclaimed with a heaving gasp, unable to believe what, or rather who, he was seeing. Doing so perhaps purely on instinct, the maligned official thrust forward his armed hand, and aimed his weapon at Shepard.

"Hold it!" John barked, returning the favor with his own gun, while still keeping a tight, astringing hold on his helpless prisoner. "Drop your weapons, get on your knees, and put your hands behind your heads! Now!"

The trio of guards stood aiming back at Shepard, finding themselves at an impasse against the intimidating Commander. They watched this militant champion forcefully restraining their colleague - using him like a human shield, in the same manner a bank robber might use a hostage. Jitters swelled in the pits of their stomachs and beads of sweat began to condense on their foreheads, as each of them swallowed back a collective gulp, nearly in unison. It had been only for a moment, but a dead silence befell the lot of them. And the human guard at the fore of the trio did his best to steady the shaking gun in his quivering hand.

"Boddicker, what do we do?!" The salarian officer behind him implored - clearly panicked and looking to perhaps the more tenured of the pack, for guidance. "That IS Commander Shepard, right?! Kim didn't tell us that Shepard was the one we were after! What are we supposed to do now?!"

"Shut up!" Boddicker abruptly snapped back over his shoulder, edgy and agitated.

"Oh spirits, do something!" Shepard's turian hostage frantically pleaded - the look of dread and hysteria on his face quickly intensifying, as he desperately tried to pry the immovable arm off his neck. "You guys gotta help me! Don't let him kill me! You can't let him kill me! Please!"

"Shut up Lavan, let me think!" The human security guard, the clear leader of the squad, shrieked again, starting to sound just as frightened and hysterical as the young captive.

"I said drop. Your. WEAPONS!" John snarled through his teeth, with a commanding fortitude, and a booming tone, that caused each of the blackguard officers to recoil in place. "I won't say it again!" He reiterated, as he flicked the safety off the pistol with his thumb, and turned it on the turian - pressing it against firmly against his temple.

"Oh, spiritsâ€|!"

"What do we doâ€|?" The second, unrestrained turian standing to Boddicker's right whispered in his direction, while still aiming his weapon. "Should we make a break for itâ€|? I ain't risking my neck for Lavan. He's dead, either wayâ€|"

"Noâ€|" Boddicker replied in a hushed, but newly determined voice, as he swallowed back the knot that had lodged itself into his throat. "We can take himâ€|"

"What?!" The turian hissed back, in a throaty, whispered outburst. "Have you lost your mind?! That's Commander Shepard!"

"Just shut your mouth and follow my lead! It's three of us against one of him!"

"Oh no!" Shepard gasped to himself, as he watched the opposing turian's eyes widen with fear, while the opposing human's narrowed with a foolhardy intrepidity.

"Wait a minute! Stop!" Shepard ordered, nearly pleading, while turning his own weapon back on the pack. "Don't do this! Don't-!"

A flash of white, and a thunder crack! It wasn't clear who fired the first shot, but before John could even finish his sentence, a deafening fusillade of gunfire rang out, as the three terrified security officers unleashed a frenzied, wanton salvo in Shepard's general direction.

POW! POW! POW! POW! The shots rang out in the narrow hallway like firecrackers going off in a steel drum. They the walls of the corridor in the bright, rapidfire glow and shadows of the muzzle flashes, like a nightclub strobe light.

Having sensed the volley long before it had even commenced, Shepard was left with no choice but to put his restrained turian captive between himself and the blazing barrage - utilizing his body as a "human" shield, so to speak. A tactic employed strictly out of necessity, not enmity.

"Argh! Uuah! Ngh!" His turian escutcheon raled in agony - jolting and spasming violently in Shepard's arms, as he was laid to waste with round after round, boring into his hardened alien flesh. John propped him up, from behind - gritting his teeth as he felt every bullet, every shot find its mark. After a grueling second, he finally felt the poor, defenseless fool's full load fall limp, bereft of life.

Raising his own weapon in retaliation, John took quick aim from behind his fleshy shield, and returned fire. An acute, narrow eyed gaze, and three rapid, masterful shots was all it took on his part! One shot to shatter the bridge of the opposing turian officer's nose. Another to drill straight through the salarian's eye socket. And finally, the last to pierce the flesh of the foolhardy human's throat.

As swiftly as it had begun, the thundering gunshots came to an abrupt and violent end, as the three attacking officers collapsed to the floor. Two of the three were dead on their feet before they could even hit the ground.

Officer Boddicker, the human instigator, was the last to remain on his feet. He dropped his weapon, which hit the floor with a loud clang, as he wrapped both hands around his throat, now spewing a spray blood like a broken sprinkler head. His head swam, his heart raced, and his eyes rolled back into his head, as his knees buckled under his own weight. When he did finally manage to hit the floor, his navy blue and gold uniform was already drenched in the crimson stain of his own life fluid, swashing down his chest, like a waterfall. He gasped and wheezed, gurgled and coughed, as blood continued to ooze from between his fingers, which he held hopelessly clasped around his throat. Writhing and twitching on the floor in

agony, he looked up in his killer's direction, as his vision quickly began to blur and go darkâ€¦

John slowly laid down his dead weight turian prisoner, who unwillingly had given his own life to protect him. He then looked down and returned the dying human's gaze. There was a look of terror in those fading eyes - a look crying out for help and mercyâ€¦ But as merciful as John Shepard was, this poor, dying, misguided soul was far beyond clemency or help. And the only merciful thing to do now was to end itâ€¦

The Commander exhaled a rueful sigh, raised his weapon, and aimed it at the hemorrhaging crimson figure on the floor. With one quick motion of his finger, he granted the officer his mercyâ€¦ One final stroke of tension shot across Boddicker's entire body, as the round pierced the center of his skull. His hands slid off his throat, falling to a rest on the floor at his sides. And with that, his torment had come to an end.

"Damn itâ€¦" Shepard cursed to himself with an angry, frustrated, and lamented sigh, as he took a long, hard look around at the gruesome sight of the bloodied carnage he'd unleashed - a familiar sight he had grown oh so tired of seeing. He also glanced down at the shredded, bloodied remains of the turian he was previously holding up. It was a young turian. Too young, in fact. Perhaps not too young to fight in a war, but it was surely one of the most youthful lives he'd ever extinguished...

"God damn itâ€¦!" He condemningly cried out to himself once more, through a set of tightly gritted teeth, as he stood remorsefully shaking his head. "Why couldn't all of you just-?! Argh, damn it!" He said, clenching his fists in a rueful rage, as he did his best to dismiss the grisly site, and proceed with the situation at hand.

"It's clear, Taliâ€¦" John turned and shouted back, into the opened staircase. "Butâ€¦ make sure you cover his eyes. He doesn't need to see thisâ€¦"

On his queue, the lavender masked quarian emerged from the stairwell door, with the young, brown haired boy perched cozily on her arms. She held her gloved, tri-fingered hand over the top half of his face, masking his eyes like a visor from the harrowing spectacle.

She sighed softly, under her breath, as she surveyed the sight for herself. "They never just surrender, do theyâ€¦?" She asked.

"What happenedâ€¦?" Matty beckoned with an anxious curiosity, as he reached up, trying to pry Tali's hand away from his eyes. "I wanna see."

"No, kreshaâ€¦" Tali asserted, keeping her hand firmly in place. "Trust me. Don't look."

"We heard shots fired!" "Sounded like it came from up on the Mezzanine Deck!" "Two floors up!" "Move it!" The echo of distant voices suddenly reverberated out from within the staircase, quickly accompanied by the rapid drumming of approaching footsteps.

"Shitâ€|" Shepard muttered to himself, as he rushed back towards the door, leaping over the fallen bodies like hurdles. When he reached it, he pressed his finger to the illuminated, green holo-panel, forcing the door to slide shut.

"Get away from the door." He instructed, as he shielded his face with one hand, while raising his handgun with the other. He aimed it directly at a small access panel nestled directly beneath the holographic switch. POW! POW! Two rapid shots rang out, as the Commander fired into the wall, destroying the circuitry associated with the door's opening and locking mechanism, and reducing it to little more than a sparking, singed hole in the wall.

"That won't keep 'em out long..." Shepard muttered, as he turned back around towards Tali. "Come on. Gordon and Miranda won't last much longer without our helpâ€|" He insisted, as he hooked his arm around hers, and ushered her into a sprint down the hallway, away from the stairs.

"By the goddessâ€|" An asari remarked, afflicted with both trepidation and awe, as she glanced around at the floor. "Some random straggler did THISâ€|?!"

She stood side-by-side-by-side with two other agents of the Illustria security force - a human, and a salarian - all three of which stood equally stunned and aghast at the impressive and intimidating site left behind. This was the once lavish entry way to the Carmenta Illustria's primary dining area; The Mazelai Dining Hall. And it now laid ravaged and demolished - what was left of it anyway. It was as if the entry way, in its entirety, had been blown out by an immense percussion of some sort. Like a powerful blast of TNT being used to excavate a mineral mine. More foreboding still, were the twisted remains of what laid scattered at their feet.

"There're at least ten darn mechs here-!" The dark haired human officer added, with a brooding sense of anxiety, as he pointed a rigid yet shaky finger to the ground - sweeping it across the litter of mangled machine parts. "-and they've all been blown to hellâ€| Now, I don't know about you guys-" He continued, as he looked around at his compatriots, with a pale expression, and a churning stomach. "-but I'm not so sure I wanna find whoever did thisâ€|"

As the three insurgent troops stood discussing the bleak and distressing situation amongst themselves, they were completely heedless to the approach of one human Commander sneaking up, just around the corner outside of the gouged-out dining hall entrance.

Shepard crept up in a low, crouched down position, with his weapon primed and ready - his finger fixed on the trigger. As he neared the sound of the chattering voices around the corner, he raised his opposite hand to his side signaling Tali, who followed closely along behind him with Matty safely under her shadow, to stop.

The Commander glanced back at the two, simply pressing a pointed finger against his lips, as if to say "Shhhâ€|" Ever so carefully, he turned back, pressed himself against the wall, and cautiously leaned out of cover for a better look.

"No one person could do this." John heard the salarian say, as he

peeked around the corner, spotting the 3 guards prattling on nervously. "This took at least five or six people..."

"Yeah, or a biotic." The asari added.

"No one can generate a blast like this without the use of amp. And all amps all checked in before departure, you know that."

"Someone could've snuck one on."

"We use the same biometric screening systems they use on the Citadel. State-of-the-art. No way they could've snuck one on..."

As the three officers continued to drivel on and mince words with one another, Shepard retracted himself back into cover. Without uttering a single word, he turned back to Tali and held up three fingers, indicating the number of perpetrators he spotted. He then pointed his index and middle fingers at Tali and Matty respectively, subsequently pointing down for the ground. "Stay here." His gestures indicated. Tali acknowledged the request with a hesitant nod, as Matty just looked on - wide eyed and anxious, with a gulp lodged halfway down his throat, and butterflies swarming in his stomach.

John turned back, and looked down to spot a large chunk of marble rock resting near his feet. It was obviously a fragment from one of the ivory and gold columns that had been blown out in the blast, formerly framing the arched entryway. He reached out, quietly grabbed it up off the floor, and held it up in his palm - bobbing it up and down a bit to weigh it in his hand. The rock itself was only a bit larger than a human fist - perhaps comparable to the size of a krogan fist - but it was heavy and blunt. It would do nicely.

With the hefty crag in one hand, he sheathed his sidearm with the other. His eyes narrowed just then, as he took a deep breath, and held it - poising himself like a cheetah stalking a group of oblivious wildebeest through the brush. Rock in hand, he spun himself out from around the corner, slow and stealthily, and quietly crept up on the unsuspecting trio, whose backs were still to him.

"Well, they couldn't have gotten far." The salarian at the center of the group conjectured. "We should keep-Arggh!" He suddenly cried out in pain, as his legs were taken right out from under him, when Shepard darted forward, and kicked in the back of his knee. While he wobbled on one leg, the adept Commander hooked his hand onto one of the salarian's horn-like head extremities and finished the job, slamming his skull to the ground with unforgiving, knock-out force.

The human and asari - equally stunned and aghast at the suddenness of the unexpected attack - both jumped and reached for their own sidearms, on instinct. John immediately took aim at the human officer's head and launched the heavy boulder, as hard as he could, directly into the side of his face, abruptly hammering the guard off his feet, with a bloodcurdling thud. While the asari pulled her own sidearm off her hip, the fervent Commander was already on top of her - wrenching her wrist, and aiming the gun away before it even had the chance to fully extend in her grip. He then pried the weapon out of her hand, with a rowing motion, jerked her around, and wrapped his thick arm around her neck before she even could even fully comprehend what was happening.

"Ack! Agh!" She gasped and gagged, as her blue hands flailed around behind her, desperately trying to claw at his face, or pull his arms away from her neck.

"Shhhhhâ€¦ Shh-Shh-Shh-Shhh..." Shepard whispered delicately, in an attempt to quell her violent thrashing. It wasn't long before her soft, cerulean eyelids grew heavy, and the world around her faded into the dismal darkness. When her entire body went limp, and her arms fell flaccid at her side, John eased his hold and carefully lowered her down to the ground.

He exhaled, as he looked down at the three, seriously injured, but alive unconscious bodies. "Okay Tali, it's clear." He addressed, towards the entrance.

On his cue, the helmeted, lavender beauty stepped out from behind the corner, with a brown-haired little boy linked to her hand.

"Uh-ohâ€¦" Matty uttered with a combination of awe and angst, as he looked at the 3 security guards laid out at John's feet. "It's the bad policemenâ€¦ Areâ€¦ Are they going to heaven now?" He beckoned with a trembling voice as he looked up innocently at Shepard.

The Commander's eyes flashed wide for a brief moment, as he looked back at the purehearted child.

"No buddy, not todayâ€¦" He kindly reassured, with a slow shake of his head. "These three'll be going to prison, that's for sure. But right now, they're just having themselves a little nap."

"Ohâ€¦ Okay." He said back, seemingly alleviated.

"Wellâ€¦ This IS the main dining hall." Tali then put forth, as she stepped forward, into the atrium, looking at the ruinous remnants of the once lavish dining area. "What's left of it anywayâ€¦ No sign of Miranda or Dr. Freeman though..." She said, exhibiting a mild sense of concern.

"That's all going to take a loooooong time to clean upâ€¦" The young lad added, shaking his head as he looked into the ravaged room.

In the meantime, John was busy sweeping away some of the scrap and debris that was left behind by the destroyed mechs - sifting for their armaments with his foot. Among the pile of bits and pieces, his eyes did manage to quickly spot about three M-9 Tempest Class submachine guns - the standard issue arsenal for the LOKI classification of combat mech. He bent down and picked one of them up. This particular weapon, however, still had most of the unfortunate mech's arm attached to it. Taking the scrawny metal arm in one hand, and the barrel of the gun in the other, he quickly yanked them apart, with considerable ease, turned to Tali and tossed the weapon towards her, before bending down and picking up a second. The femme fatale quarian gave the weapon a quick examination while Shepard did the same. They each ejected the incumbent thermal clips to be sure they were unused and ample in munitions before reinserting them back into the weapons.

"We better take a closer look." John advised, as he motioned towards

the interior of the dining hall with his head, keeping his new gun at the ready. "Come on."

Tali nodded, as she took the silent and cow-eyed Matty by the hand, and cautiously entered the cavernous dining area behind Shepard.

Bedlam was all that was left now of one of the most affluent dining parlors in the whole galaxy. A hodge-podge of splintered wood, crumbled porcelain, shattered glass, and mangled silver. Suffice to say, had a ravenous tornado torn through the room, it probably wouldn't have caused nearly as much damage.

"Listen!" Tali began in a low whisper, leaning closer to his ear, as they warily maneuvered their way towards the center of the parlor. "I know you only kill when you have to. But you're under equipped, and you won't let me help you. You're taking an enormous risk trying to spare their lives like this. This is their fault. You don't owe them anything."

"I know." Shepard quickly answered back, as his eyes panned around the room like a motion detector - searching for targets or a potential ambush. "But it's not for them. Tali, this poor kid's seen and been through enough today to traumatize him for life." He said, as he glanced down at the gleamy-eyed little boy. "He doesn't need to see the blood and the butchery that we see everyday..."

Despite the legitimacy of the Commander's concerns, little Matty had an air of optimism about him. It may have been him just putting on a brave face - an attempt to mask a deep, unrelenting sensation of dread with a false bravado - but something in those innocent little eyes of his just cried out. "_This will all be over soon, and everything will be fine."_

"John, look!" Tali called out, all of a sudden, as she pointed towards what appeared to be an armored body strewn across the dining hall floor, at the very center of the wrecked room. "Over there."

"I see it." Shepard acknowledged, as he cautiously began making his way towards it. "Wait here."

He carefully navigated the remaining piles of idle clutter on the floor, and moved in towards the sprawled out, recumbent figure, donned in a light set of burgundy Blood-Pack armor. When he finally reached it, a pale grimace overtook his expression, as he beheld a grisly sight. It was an asari Blood Pack mercenary; one Teshya, by name. Miranda's former attacker. The one whom he had previously observed dominating his second in command, in combat, via the ship's hijacked surveillance feeds. The fallen merc was laid out on her back, with her head cocked to the right - her eyes wide open, staring blankly out towards the floor. The back of her skull was split open like a ruptured honeydew, which had given way to the immense reservoir of lavender blood now pooled and settled around her head and most of her upper body.

"What is it?" Matty beckoned, with an anxious curiosity, as he looked up at Tali and tugged on her hand. "I can't see. Can we go take a look?"

"No!" Shepard abruptly shouted out, with a rigid finger pointed towards Matty. "No. Just uhâ€¦ Just wait there."

"What is it, John?"

"One of the mercs." Shepard replied, slowly shaking his head, as he glanced back down for one final look. "Like you said, no sign of Gordon or Mirandaâ€¦ Let's check the kitchen." He suggested as he rejoined her.

They both turned and headed towards the kitchen entrance. The doorway was designed for a swinging set of double-doors. But only one of the doors remained hanging there - the other one had been completely torn off its hinges, and might as well have been a throw rug, as the three walked over it. The Commander was the first one into the room, utilizing a guarded approach, with his sidearm at the ready. As soon as he entered, a foul, stomach churning odor hit his nostrils, causing him to wrinkle his nose in reaction. The room was laden with a settling mist that was part smoke, and part extinguisher system exhaust. It stung his eyes a bit, and the scent of charred, burnt flesh was pungent and overpowering.

"Argh, ahemâ€¦ What is that smell?!" John beckoned in a hoarse, froggy voice, whilst clearing his throat repeatedly.

"Ewwwâ€¦!" Matty expressed, with a similar sense of disgust, as he wrinkled and pinched his nose between his fingers. "It smells like the time my daddy made breakfast in bed for Mommy, and we had to call the firemen to help..."

"I don't smell a thing." Tali added, coyly and cockily shrugging her shoulders.

"Something's not right hereâ€¦" Shepard muttered, as he gazed around the kitchen, which had been left in ruined state not all that dissimilar from the adjacent dining room.

Simply at a glance, one could see numerous pots, pans, and other cooking utensils haphazardly scattered about the room. A large section of the ceiling had been torn out, leaving part of an aluminum ventilation duct strewn across the floor, in a mangled state. The massive glass pane, belonging to the nearby cleanroom section of the kitchen, had been completely destroyed, leaving sparkling bits of shattered glass everywhere. And dozens of little piles of spices and ingredients, along with goopy blotches of sauces and condiments, stained the floor - most of which seemed to have come from the massive, toppled kitchen shelf near the back.

"Where the bosh'tet are Miranda and Dr. Freeman?!" Tali insisted, with a growing sense of worry and apprehension. "They were just here! We just saw them on the camera feeds!"

"No ideaâ€¦" John muttered, uneasily. "But look, there's a back door." He said, noting metal sliding door situated at the far rear of the kitchen. "They must've gone out that way. We may still be able to catch them. Come on."

Tali nodded, as she and Shepard started down one of the aisles, towards the exit.

"What are we looking for?" The inquisitive little boy at her hand queried, as he looked around in all directions.

"Just some friends of ours, Kresha. There's nothing to worry about." She abruptly stopped mid-sentence, as she felt herself walk straight into Shepard's rigid back, like walking into a brick wall. "Hey. John, what happened?"

"Stop." He ordered, as he stood staring at an outstretched pair of charred legs on the floor, protruding out from around the end of the counter.

As Tali peered over his shoulder, she was quickly met with the same unsettling sight.

"Step back. Get him back." He immediately insisted, as he waved his hand backwards, and tentatively crept forward. "I'll take a look..."

John proceeded on down the narrow aisle, between the countertops, with his weapon brandished, as Tali scooped Matty up in her arms, and looked on, from a short distance away. The Commander aimed his weapon down at the motionless figure, as he turned the corner - preparing himself to engage, should this prove to be some sort of ruse. This possibility quickly vanished, however, as he turned the corner and was met with the charred, bloodied remains of the second Blood-Pack Aggressor.

Tali looked on, with Matty perched in her arms, as Shepard released a heavy sigh of relief, and lowered his weapon.

"Geez, Gordon..." She heard him say, under his breath, as he shook his head, and smirked a bit. "Okay, that man is dangerous."

"John. Who is it?!" Tali called out, anxiously. "Tell me it's not..."

"No." Shepard abruptly refuted, cutting her off mid-question. "No, it's not them. It's the other merc. The turian. Wherever Gordon and Miranda are, they seem to be doing just fine without our help."

"Hmm..." Tali uttered to herself, as she tapped a curled finger against her flashing mouthpiece, and took a brief glance around the wrecked room.

"Would've been nice to have met up with 'em." John added, as she slowly swiveled around - her eyes continuing to pan across the demolished kitchen, searching for further traces of their teammates. "But looks like we'll be doing this on our own, too."

Just as he said it, she spotted something. "John, over here!" Tali shouted out, as she rushed over towards a kitchen counter back near the entrance of the dining room, to the left.

"Stay close, okay?" She instructed, putting Matty down, as she reached the jutting counter.

"Okay."

The stalwart Commander quickly joined her, as she moved in for a closer inspection. The countertop, which at one point was pressed flush up against the wall, had been pulled away a good three feet, revealing a large air duct cavity, with the grate covering left shoddily unfastened and out of place.

Shepard leaned forward, reached towards the grate, and with an effortless flick of his finger, tilted it back, causing it to topple to the floor with a pang, like an aluminum domino, fully exposing the gaping, shadowy escape route.

"Well, that's one mystery solved." Tali cynically offered up, as she turned to John and shrugged her shoulders.

"Heh." Shepard chuckled, with a slow shake of his head. "Stealthâ€¦ Gordon Freeman styleâ€¦"

28. Chapter 28: Enemy is Everywhere Part I

****Salvation: Episode I - The Taking of the Carmenta
Illustria****

Disclaimer: This fan-fiction is part of an episodic series taking place after Salvation: A Half-Life/Mass Effect Universe Fan Fiction, which will lead directly to its sequel, Salvation II: Project Prometheus. These episodes and sequel take place OUTSIDE of the Mass Effect 3 continuity. Characters property of their respective companies, Half-Life created by Valve and Mass Effect created by Bioware.

****Chapter 28: Enemy is Everywhere (Part I)****

****Cornered****

"We're not gonna go into that hole, are weâ€¦?" Matty asked, unenthused, with a bit of a worried grimace on his face.

"I don't know..." Tali replied, unsure. "SHOULD we go in after them?" She followed up, looking to John.

"I'm not going in there!" John asserted, conclusively. "Besides, those vents are a maze. By now, they could be anywh-

"Alright, stay alert!" An abrupt, domineering shout echoed from within the adjacent dining room, causing Shepard to instinctively and immediately draw forth his weapon.

"Move!" He ordered, pushing Tali and Matty's heads down into a hunkered state - goading them, in unison, towards one of the three counters near the center of kitchen.

"You three, check over there!" The stray voice shouted out again - louder and closer this time, and accompanied by blended murmurs and heavy tramping. "Keep your eyes open! If you spot anythingâ€¦ shoot to kill!"

"W-wh-who is itâ€¦?!" The brown-haired little boy pleaded in a trembling voice, quivering under Tali's bosom, like a baby bird taking shelter 'neath it's mother's wing. "It's the bad policemen

isn't it?! They're coming to get us!"

"No, shhhhâ€¦ Stay quiet Matthew. It's gonna be okay." The Commander reassured, with a finger pressed vertically against his lips. "Tali, keep him low and move towards the back." He directed, motioning towards the rear kitchen exit. "I'll cover you."

"Right." The quarian combatant quickly acknowledged, as she drew her own weapon with one hand, while holding Matty's securely in the other. "Come on kresha. Keep your voice down, and stay right with me."

Shepard turned back the other way, towards the dining room entrance, as he tightened his grip around the SMG - poised to pop out of cover at less than a moment's notice.

"Fan out! They might still be here!" The resounding voice ordered once more.

John peeked over counter, towards the door. Through the gap in the entryway, he could make out several armed figures - all of which were donned in the same dark blue, gold lined uniformed - roving back and forth within the dining room, searching the area.

"Traius, check the kitchen!"

"I'm on it!"

When he heard the chatter emanating from the other room, Shepard's every muscle tightened. He took a deep breath, and held it, as his eyes narrowed - zeroing in on the entrance. Even his pupils seemed to dilate, before immediately contracting in a predatory fashion.

The silver tip of a handgun was the first thing to enter the room, as the salarian holding it cautiously pushed the one remaining door aside. His jaw fell, and eyes opened wide at the decimated sight he was met with. He quickly began swiveling his head back and forth, aiming his gun where he looked, as he tried to take it all in, and spot any sign of intruders.

"What on Sur'kesh happened in here?!" He exclaimed under his breath. Suddenly, something appeared in the corner of his eye. POW! The sound of gunfire. Before he knew what hit him, a powerful blow, like the kick from a wild bol-quay tossed him to the ground, and an agonizing jolt of pain tore into his left shoulder, leaving him writhing and bleeding out onto the floor.

"They're in the kitchen!" "Shots fired! Shots fired!" "Traius is down!" John could hear the multitude of voices shouting and screaming, with a mixture of panic and urgency, as he ducked back down into cover, with the barrel of his SMG still smoking. "Shoot! Shoot!"

Suddenly, the room erupted into a deafening deluge of gunfire, from the dining room. The one remaining door was littered with pock marks, before being completely blown off its hinges. Whatever pots and pans, or bottles and containers, were left standing on the counters were quickly blown off - exploding into colorful messes of food and glass. The salvo was frenzied, panicked, and unrestrained - an impulsive retaliation from a troop of under trained, inexperienced

officers.

POW! POW! POW! POW! The shots just kept coming, drilling and ricocheting into the walls and countertops - leaving the front of the room bespeckled in bullet holes. While all this was happening, Shepard quickly made his way back towards Tali and Matty, who were still safe behind cover - though Matty trembled with fright, as he pressed his two hands against his ears in an effort to drown out the incessant, blaring sound.

"Stay down and follow me out the back!" The Commander yelled over the perpetual battery of gunfire, close to Tali's ear. "Let's move!"

Tali kept Matty's head tucked down, over his chest, as the three rushed in unison past the kitchen counter, towards the rear exit of the kitchen. Coming to it, Shepard reached his hand up towards the green holopanel, only to abruptly draw it back, as a stray round ricocheted off the wall, directly beside it. Trying again, he quickly reached up and swiped at the holopanel, before immediately pulling his hand back down.

"Go! Go!" He ordered, as he waved them through, like a stopping guard directing traffic. Tali and Matty flew through the opened doorway, and out into a back hallway, which seemed to be designated for employee use. As John fled out the door, joining the quarian and the small boy, he stood upright, closing the door behind him, before shooting out the door's holopanel, leaving it a sparking, smoking, hole in the wall.

"Let's go, come on!" He ushered on, as he placed his arm around Tali, heralding her and the boy into a fast dash down the hallway.

"Come on, Kresha!" Tali said, as she scooped Matty back up, running with him, in her arms.

The three of them sprinted down the corridor, towards the end.

"Go that way!" "Circle around back!" "We'll cut 'em off!" An amalgam of shouting voices flew in from around the corner, up ahead.

Shepard practically screeched to a halt, as he watched the growing shadows on the wall, projecting from the untold number of figures charging in their direction.

"Back! Back! The other way, go!" He urged, rapidly turning them around, and guiding them back in the opposite direction.

They darted on past the kitchen door and took a sharp right turn where the hallway split off into a four-way junction. Proceeding a few yards down, the trio found a small darkened recess within the corridor, which led to a locked, unlabeled room.

"Quick! In here!" John instructed, as he pulled Tali and Matty into the hidden alcove. Tali let the boy down, and restrained him, keeping his back, and her own, firmly against the locked door. The trampling sounds grew louder, as a squad of numerous officers closed in on their location. Suddenly, they stoppedâ€¦

"Which way...?" The three evaders in the small recess heard a

querying voice ask from literally just around the corner. "See anyone down there!?" "No, no one." "They must've gone this way, keep searching!" "They couldn't have gone far!" "Radio the other teams! Have them circle around, and meet us back on the other side!" "We'll head 'em off!" The sound of chattering voices and the pounding drum of hard soles against the floor soon grew soft and distant, as the officers moved on.

John ever so carefully moved forward, peering around the corner to make sure the area was, infact, clear. "Alrightâ€|" He began after noting that the immediate danger had passed. "Let's keep moving."

"Th-Th-They're gonna get us, aren't they?!" Matty timorously exclaimed, as he clung tightly to Tali's waist. "What are they gonna do to us? Where'd they take my mom and dad?!"

"Kresha, it's okay..." She whispered back to him, lightly stroking his hair, and gently rubbing his back and shoulders. "We'd never let them hurt you. Don't be afraid."

"Matthew, listen to me." The Commander began in a low whisper, as he squatted down directly before the boy. "None of the bad policemen are gonna get you. I know this is scary for you, but right now I REALLY need to stay as absolutely quiet as possible, okay? Can you do that for us?"

Matty was silent for a moment. He tried hard to suppress the quiver of his chin, as he clenched his eyes shut, and bit down on his lips, with a grimace. After exhaling a long, shaky breath, he breathed in with a lone sniffle and looked back up at Shepard. "...Okay." He affirmed, with a hesitant nod but resolute nod. "I willâ€|"

"I know it's hard buddy. But you're one tough little trooper." John commended, as he stood back up - his weapon still in hand, primed and ready for combat. "Now come on. Let's go get your parents back."

The mere notion lit Matty's glossy red eyes up with hope and anticipation. His lips split apart, through which he took in a poignant breath, and held it for just a moment.

"Come on, little one." He heard Tali say, as he felt a gentle tug on his hand.

Shepard was the first to step out of their tiny nook, into the narrow hallway. But rather than go back the way they came, he slowly moved forward down the corridor, which seemed to be some to serve as some sort of rear, employee access to the various establishments on this deck. Continuing on, they passed several more doorways like the one they had just sought cover in, lining both sides of the hallway. The only difference was, each of these were labeled.

EMPLOYEES ONLY - faded black lettering etched on a plain white plaque on a door read.

LIZARI LOUNGE - read another, in the same fashion. Except for the fact that the black lettering on this one seemed to be printed over some older text, which was faded and obscured to the point of being illegible.

And as the three continued on, they found that all of the doors were similarly labeled.

AS'GAN BREEZE
>THE EMPORIA
ILL LUSTRUS
>THE ASPARA LUX
LEDATIC TAVERN
>AZ'ZARAI
THE ESTREYA CAFE

By the peculiar names, it was easy enough to infer that these were the back doors leading to the vast array of clubs, bars, lounges, and eateries located on just the Mezzanine Deck alone.

"Taliâ€|" Shepard chimed in with a low voice just above a whisper, as they walked. "How many floors up do you think the bridge would be?"

"It'd be on the main deck." Tali answered, as they proceeded forth, continuing on past the various doors. "And if I remember correctly from the deck plan, the main deck was just above the Vista Deck, which is one floor up, so ju-"

At that moment - SWISH - the door immediately to her left unexpectedly slid open, revealing a tall asari and a dark skinned turian, both donned in security uniforms, standing within the doorway.

"Hey!" The asari shouted, in surprise, when she suddenly found herself face to face the quarian.

On instinct, Tali released Matty's hand and pushed him aside, out of harm's way, when she saw the two begin to raise their weapons. The fierce quarian then lunged forward, at whirlwind speed, and delivered a stiff, precise kick into the side of the turian's patella. His knee bent like a flimsy twig about to snap, with an excruciating twinge. As his entire leg buckled out from under him, Tali turned her attention towards the asari. She ensnared her armed hand, before she could fire, and forced the aim of the weapon up towards the ceiling.

"Argh!" "Ngh!" As the two grunted and grappled, vying for control of the weapon, Tali took note of the stirring turian, slowly trying to stagger back to his feet. Never once releasing her cemented grip on the blue aggressor, she lunged in and delivered a swift, hard knee straight into the turian's temple, crushing and sandwiching his head between her kneecap and the wall. The turian's eyes flashed wide for a moment, before rolling shut into the back of his head, as he plopped down onto the floor. With one threat nullified, Tali swung the asari around, and charged headlong out of the entryway, across the narrow corridor. "Umph!" The asari grunted, as Tali slammed and pinned her against the wall. There was no give in either woman, however, as they both clung to the same sidearm, holding on for dear life. Tali swung the pistol up, above the asari's head, and proceeded to repeatedly slam the officer's armed hand against the wall, in an effort to disarm her. Each thud that came from the pounding of the asari's hand was louder, harder, and faster than the one that came before it. The Thessian officer grit her teeth and clenched her eyes in agony, as her hand was being pummeled, like concrete under a jackhammer, before her grip finally began to ebb.

POW!

Just before Tali could dislodge the weapon from the asari's grasp, it went off with a resounding booming, leaving a small, smoking hole in the ceiling, before being knocked out of hand, and falling to the floor. With her enemy disarmed, Tali thrust the asari forward with all her might, propelling her back across the hall, face first, into the opposing wall, with a bone-rattling thud.

"Urgh!" She exhaled an agonized whimper, as she collapsed, face down, onto the floor, battered and motionless.

The whole thing happened within the span of a few seconds, but it was so abrupt that it all seemed like just a blur. Tali took a moment to dust herself off and regain her composure. As she glanced up at John, she found him holding his gun in an outstretched hand, ready to fire, with an impressed and astonished smirk on his face.

"Whatâ€¦?" She asked, as she shrugged nonchalantly. "You think I haven't learned anything from all the times I've watched _you _beat miscreants to a pulp?"

"Wow!" She then heard Matty exclaim in amazement, coaxing her to turn around to face him. He stood there, looking up at her with a beaming open-mouthed smile which spanned from ear to ear. And his eyes - they sparkled with a youthful twinkle of wonder and admiration. "You're real strong!" He proclaimed, enthusiastically shaking his hands about. "How'd you do that?! You're just like 'Lady Paramount', on Justice Avengers!"

"Hehehâ€¦!" Tali chuckled, as she smiled and blushed under her mask. "Well, I don't know who that is little one, but th-"

"The shot came from over here!" A high pitched, but grizzled voice suddenly shouted out, as a uniformed salarian suddenly skidded into view, behind the young boy, at the far end of the hallway. "Hey you! Hold it right there!" He demanded, as he raised his weapon and took aim.

Tali gasped, as she suddenly grabbed Matty by the shoulders, and swung him around; thus giving her back to the salarian and placing her own body between the child and the armed gunman.

POW! POW!

Twin gunshots suddenly rang out, as Tali's entire body suddenly became awash in the shimmering white glow generated by her suit's repellent shielding. One of the shots actually rippled right at the base of her skull.

"Bastard!" Shepard snarled in a rage, as he cut past Tali, with his own weapon aimed out in front. He squeezed hard on the trigger, unleashing a thunderous salvo of rapid-fire death, which riddled a green blood-soaked trail across the uniformed salarian's chest, leaving him dead on his feet before throwing him onto the floor, back first.

"You alright?!" He beseeched, as he turned back towards Tali, feverishly running his hands down her shoulders and back, checking for ruptures or wounds.

"Yes John, we're fine!" She assured, with a nod. "Built in k-barriers, remember?"

"Over here! They're in the employee access hall!" "Box 'em in, and cut 'em off!" "Get some back-up up here!"

Several voices echoed in, coming from both ends of the hallway, as John swiveled his head back and forth. The sounds of chatter and charging footsteps grew louder and closer with each passing moment.

"Shitâ€¦!" Shepard griped through gritted teeth. "Come on, in here!" He urged, as he pulled both Tali and the boy into the opened door of the nearby room that had expelled the two fallen guards, which now laid on the ground, unconscious.

"Come on, kresha! Keep with me!" Tali begged, as she yanked the frightened child in, alongside her.

With both her and Matty securely in the room, John pressed the green access panel on the door, sliding it shut. POW! POW! Two deafening shots echoed loudly within the closed space, as he once again shot out the door's locking mechanism. "Alright, let's go." He then urged, as he breezed past them, to the fore.

The room they had entered was another kitchen - a much smaller one than the one pertaining to the Illustria's Mazelai Dining Hall. This one almost seemed like the kind of kitchen you'd find in a cozy little fast-food establishment. And with a name like "The Hungry Elcor", that's likely what it was. John weaved his way past the unmanned stoves and frying stations, past the forward counter, and into the homely dining area, with Tali and Matty right on his pressed on, whisking by the various booths and tables, towards the restaurant's front entrance. As they approached it, the twin metallic doors split open automatically, revealing the Mezzanine Deck's lustrous central hallway.

Shepard pressed his back against the inside of the entryway, as he took a fleeting glance outside to assess any danger in the vicinity.

"Okay." He exhaled, as his pupils darted back and forth, under his tightly clenched brow. "It's clear. Come on."

The Hungry Elcor was a small, modest, restaurant tucked away into an obscure corner of the deck. As the trio carefully emerged, they were met with a very short flight of stairs, leading straight up to the main hallway. Before ascending, John stretched out his neck for a better view of the floor, and again swiveled his head from side to side, appraising any perils, and watching for the most subtle signs of movement.

The Mezzanine Deck was a place lit up with all the luminance and grandeur of the Citadel's Silversun strip. Bright, beaming, animated holo-signs hung over each separate restaurant and club. Lounging couches, and massaging recliners upholstered with rich, tanned, Thessian Leather, littered the deck sporadically, for the tuckered out party-goer. Glorious golden chandeliers, along with curtains of luxurious ruby silk adorned the archways, and pillars of pearl and ivory lined the hallway, like the columns of some ancient roman

emperor's palaceâ€¦ It was a consummate picture of affluence. All of the vivid lights and dancing signs were gorgeous together - visually stunning and inventive. Truly the only thing missing were the patrons to indulge in their splendor.

But, however breath taking the sights may have been, they weren't worth even a second glance, as John and Tali emerged out, onto the hall.

"We gotta find another stairway." He pointedly declared, rushing down the deck, as his narrowed eyes panned back and forth, with his aimed weapon quick to follow.

"There was a staircase located beside the main elevators, at the North end of this deck." Tali chimed in, as she pointed straight ahead, into the distance, past the long strip of juxtaposed establishments. "They should be just around the corner up there."

"Right." He immediately agreed, with a single nod. "Here's what we're gonna doâ€¦" He then began to dictate, as they briskly made for the Northern end of the ghostly deck, with sharpened eyes. "Since stealth is no longer a viable option, we have no choice but to force our way up to the bridge... These security cops are reckless and under trained, as long as we stick to the narrower corridors, I SHOULD be able to nullify their numbers, and keep them from overwhelming us."

"I'll keep Matty safe, John-" Tali replied, as she followed along, with the young boy huddled closely beside her. "-but we're still in this together. I'll watch your back, as I always have."

"I know, Taliâ€¦" He expressed, with a somewhat dismal sigh. "I just wish you didn't have toâ€¦"

The trio pressed on, eyes sharp and ears keen - passing bars and restaurants as they neared the Northern end of the Mezzanine Deck. Little Matthew Farrell soldiered on as best and as bravely as a young boy could. His chest throbbed with each rapid, fatigued breath he took, and his heart raced like never before with an unbridled terror that an innocent child his age should never ever have to feel. But he did his best to put on a brave face; holding back every tear, every quiver of his chin, and every muffled whimper that tried to escape his lips - for the couple before him bore the full weight of his hopes and optimisms for survival. One dayâ€¦ he'd be as strong and as brave as they are.

But, just then, as they breezed towards the Northern end of the deck, John skidded to a halt. Like the unforeseen apparition of a malevolent spirit, five glinting, mechanized figures turned the corner up ahead and came into view.

"HALT." An emotionless voice, from one of the oncoming drones ordered, as they marched in a synchronous row. "INTRUDERS DETECTED. PLEASE RELINQUISH YOUR WEAPONS AND PREPARE TO BE EXECUTED."

John gasped for breath through his clenched teeth, as he watched the squad of LOKIs raise and aim their weapons menacingly.

"Get down!" He shouted out, hooking his arms around Tali and Matty,

and flying with them to the ground, behind the narrow side of a nearby lounging couch, just as the rapidfire sound of thunder broke out. The plush, leather sofa was instantly torn to shreds. Large strips of leather, and puffs of cotton stuffing flew out in every direction, as it was ripped asunder by dozens upon dozens of searing thermal rounds.

John and Tali scurried on the ground, pressing their backs flush against the armrest side of the ravaged couch, whilst Matthew quickly pressed his hands against his ears, and clenched his eyes shut, as if wanting to pretend nothing was happening and that it would all just go away. Tali drew her arm around him, nestling him closely to her, and keeping his head tucked down low. Fortunately for the three of them, they had the entire length of the long chesterfield, and all its padding, to protect them from the perpetual deluge of hellfire, but they still wouldn't be able to sit here for long.

"Stay down!" John shouted over the incessant gunfire. He quickly shuffled himself around, onto his knees, as he raised his armed hand over the top edge of the couch, and began returning fire with a blind, sweeping spray.

Even without being able to see his targets, his keen senses and combat dexterity allowed him to take aim with reasonable accuracy. The reverberant sound of bullets penetrating steel quickly rang out, as he struck two of the five mechs, riddling them with rounds. They flailed and sparked for a moment on their feet, before the red glow of their optic sensors abruptly vanished. A series of metallic clangs echoed out, like the sounds of a heavy toolchest being knocked over, as they toppled to the floor, leaving 3 of the five still standing.

Shepard retracted himself back down, with his back against the couch, as he ejected a depleted, smoking clip from his SMG, and pulled a fresh one out of his belt.

"Get ready to move." He began, while popping the new clip into place. "Soon as I finish off the other ones, we-"

"There they are! Over there!" A shouting human voice suddenly rang out, as a small troop of guards ran into view, from the left hand side of the opposite end of the hall.

"Damn it!" The Commander snarled, as he raised his weapon and fired on the guards, causing them to immediately regress into the cover of the room they had just emerged from. But they were too far, and the encounter was too brief for him to be able to discern whether or not he'd hit anyone.

Suddenly, a stray round ricocheted off the floor, near his feet, leaving a small, singed hole in the carpeted floor, while a second shot immediately drilled into the couch, just above his shoulder, inches away from his face. Instinctively ducking his head, he looked up to see another squadron of armed officials closing in from down the right side of the hall.

Again, Shepard raised his weapon and sprayed a suppressive flurry of rapidfire shots in their direction, causing the officers to immediately seek sanctuary behind a few of the indoor trees and

benches, It was a momentary abeyance, however, as John could make out a third group of officers closing in fast from the far, southern end of the corridor. Not to mention that they were still under fire from the 3 mechs still standing behind them.

Finding themselves surrounded betwixt the proverbial rock and hard place, John took a quick look around the area, to assess a solution. What he spotted was the nearby entrance to a club called "THE LUMORIA ROOM."

All out of options, he made a hurried decision. "In there! Move!" He shouted, as he shot to his feet, pulling Tali and young Matty up with him. He shoved them forward, towards the doorway, while raising his weapon to his left, aimlessly returning fire at the discharging mechs. In the mad scramble, Tali scooped up the frightened boy, and cradled him close to her chest.

Rounds zoomed by their heads, as they blitzed forward - shattering glass, splintering wood, crumbling granite, and ricocheting off of the silvery walls all around them. It was a mere three yard dash to the door. But as the two-sided salvo through no-man's land continued, with them caught in the crossfire, it seemed more like an interminable three-mile jaunt.

One of the stray round barrelled straight towards the trio, on-course with little Matthew's cheek. But as it reached it's target, it was suddenly deflected by an unforeseen force, leaving a faint, shimmering ripple in its wake. Luckily for the boy, Tali clutched him tightly enough to her chest, that her kinetic barriers afforded him protection. Shepard, on the other hand, was not so fortunate, as he suddenly felt the searing hot kiss of molten steel graze the underside of his chin, closer than any shave he's ever had. Fortunately for him, no mortal damage had been done.

Tali ran into the recess of the doorway, pressing her omni-tooled hand against the red holographic panel. As Shepard joined her in the narrow niche, the holographic panel switched to green, and the doors immediately slid open. Into the darkened room they flew, out of the hellacious rain, as the thunderous volley continued on, outside.

John turned around, quickly pressing his hand to the holopanel again, forcing the doors to slide shut, with a swish.

The instant before the doors sealed shut, however, something caught John's eye through the gap of the closing doors. It was the dark blue visage of a pale man, donned in antiquated fashions. He stood on a high balcony, above the opposite end of the hall, simply watching with indifference, as the unrelenting battery of gunfire continued on.

No matter! When the doors sealed, both Tali and John stopped for a fleeting moment to try and catch their breaths. Tali reclined against the door, with her head drawn back, while Shepard leaned forward, panting and dripping with sweat, as he pressed his forehead against the door, with his eyes shut.

"John, you're hit!" Tali suddenly exclaimed, when she looked over at the fatigued Commander. She quickly reached one hand out towards Shepard's neck, where she saw a small rivulet of blood oozing out,

starting to permeate into the collar of his already begrimed, white dress shirt.

"It's not bad, it's just a scratch." He affirmed, with urgency, as he blocked her hand with his, and turned back around to take a look around the room.

The room seemed to be some sort of bar or nightclub, bigger than the Citadel's Dark Star Lounge, but smaller than Omega's Afterlife Club. Most of the chamber was occupied by an expansive dance floor, and a large stage at the front. There were tables, chairs, and lounging seats situated around two levels of the room, near the walls. And a lonely, illuminated bar sat nestled against the right wall. There was a dim bluish glow lingering in the room - a sort of ambient lighting that seemed to originate from nowhere. And there were several large speaker, and lighting fixtures mounted onto the walls and ceiling - all of which were in an inert state at the moment.

"We have to hurry. Come on!" Shepard insisted, as he urged Tali along.

"Where are we going?!" The brown-haired little boy implored - bobbing up and down in Tali's arms as they darted through the club, down the abandoned dancefloor. "What's happening?!"

"Shhhâ€¦. Hush now, kresha." Tali beseeched, doing her best to comfort the boy, as she held him tightly. "It'll be okay."

"This way!" Shepard ordered, as he spotted a shadowy, non-descript back door, tucked away behind the stage, to the far rear of the club.

John sprinted towards the entrance - a plain, swinging door, with no noticeable holo-panels or locking mechanisms - just yellow painted lettering that read: CREW AND STAFF ONLY

He pushed the door ajar, holding it open for Tali and Matty, as he waved them in with a fluttering wave of his hand.

The room they entered was dimly lit and cramped. The walls were thronged with spare instruments, scattered sound equipment, and surplus speakers - all of which would've been very easy to trip over, for the careless treker. The three proceeded in, weaving their way around the useless accoutrements.

"John, over here!" Tali shouted, as she rushed to the far back of the congested room. "There's a back door."

Tali made her way towards the rear exit, lit up with a green holo-panel, indicating an unlocked door, ensuring a quick escape.

"Hang on, wait!" Shepard implored, as he rushed to her side, before she could open the door. "I got an ideaâ€¦!"

"What?" She asked.

"First, I gotta seal this door." He informed, as he drew his weapon, and aimed it at the holopanel. "Don't want them getting the drop on us from behind."

As John prepared to squeeze back on the trigger, Tali placed her hand atop the barrel of his gun, and lowered it. "John, pleaseâ€¦" She began, with a tinge of sarcasm in her voice. "Allow meâ€¦" Tali put young Matthew down, beside Shepard - who lightly patted his back, as a sign of reassurance. She then moved up to the door, removed a small, rectangular device, about the size of a soda can, from a pouch on her belt, and mounted it directly beside the lit up holopanel. She then went to work on the holopanel itself, punching in a myriad of rapid keystrokes with her magic fingers. It wasn't long before the holographic door switch changed from green to red.

"What is that thingâ€¦?" The Commander inquired, raising a perplexed eyebrow, as he watched her work.

"Oh, just one of my suit's auxiliary life-support battery packs." She explained, nonchalantly, as she pulled a short, thick cable out of the same pouch, and used it to connect the mounted device to an a tiny outlet on the door, thus finalizing her work. "Don't worry thoughâ€¦" She assuaged, as she turned back around. "I never end up using them, and I have two others to spareâ€¦"

"A batteryâ€¦?" John began again, furrowing a befuddled brow. "How is that supposed to-? N-never mind." He abruptly cut himself off, with a shake of his head - knowing better than to question her technical trickery. "Listen, do you think you'd be able to work this thing?" He asked, as he walked over to a large, inert control console, pressed flush against the adjacent wall, under a large set of blackened screens.

"I'mâ€¦ sure I can figure it out, butâ€¦ why?" Tali beckoned, puzzled, as she glanced over the large, inactive table. "Thinking of throwing a party?"

"No. I didn't wanna do this, but I've got to thin this herd out a bitâ€¦" The Commander began to explain, as he pulled the current clip out of his SMG - examining it to make certain it wasn't completely depleted, before driving it back into the chamber. "We can use the music to draw 'em in. Keep 'em in the main room, and maybe use the lighting effects to disorient them... By the time they see me coming, they'll never know what hit 'emâ€¦"

Tali nodded, immediately understanding, as she waved her omni-tooled hand over the mixing and effects console, causing it to light up with a vibrant array of holographic knobs, dials, buttons, and slider switches.

"Wellâ€¦" She said with a cocky grin, under her facemask, as she inter-locked her tri-fingered hands, and stretched them outwards, cracking her knuckles. "I don't think it'll be a problem."

John gave her a modest smile, and nodded, as he turned to look down at Matty. The poor boy's face was saddened and afraid, as he stood by with his hands locked tightly over his chest, and his head tucked timorously between his shoulders.

"Hey buddyâ€¦" John said, with a soft tenderness in his voice, as he crouched down before the intimidated 7 year old - laying a comforting hand upon his shoulder. "You okayâ€¦?"

Shepard could feel the pulse of his heart racing, and the quiver of his tiny frame, as he trembled in fear. Despite this, the brave little boy looked up at the Commander, forcing a half-way smile. "I'm okay..." He assured, as he nodded politely. "I'm scared, but I'm trying to pretend I'm someone braveâ€¦ Like youâ€¦"

At that moment, the sheer courage that he saw this frightened little boy exhibiting, stirred a feeling of anger towards those that would do this, within Shepard.

"Listen. We're gonna be getting your mom and dad back real soon, okayâ€¦?" He pledged, masking his brewing rage with optimism. "Right now, I want you to stay here with Taliâ€¦ Keep her safeâ€¦"

"W-where are YOU going?"

"Me?" John asked rhetorically, with a cocky grin, and a sinister gleam in his eye, as he stood back up, and began cracking his knuckles, in the usual 'Shepard' fashion. "I'm gonna go teach some bad policemen a lesson."

Matty looked up at the tall paragon, with a gleam of admiration and adoration in his eyes, as a genuine smile slowly crept in on his face. John reciprocated the grin, and gave the boy's hair a quick tussle before turning back to Tali.

"Tali. I'm sorry about earlierâ€¦" He whispered tenderly.

"I knowâ€¦" She replied, with the same tone, after having brought the console back online to full functionality. "Me tooâ€¦"

They stood there, quietly staring at each other for a brief, passing moment, before Tali spoke up again, breaking the silence.

"You'd better hurryâ€¦" She advised, as she turned back towards the screen, which now showed a few armed guards and mechs scouring the nightclub interior, with several more entering the doorway, as they spoke. "It looks like the party's starting without youâ€¦"

A look of stone resolve overtook the Commander's bruised and lacerated face, as he looked up at the screen. With a stern nod to his quarian love, he raised his weapon, and made for the door.

29. Chapter 29: Enemy is Everywhere Part II

****Salvation: Episode I - The Taking of the Carmenta
Illustria****

Disclaimer: This fan-fiction is part of an episodic series taking place after Salvation: A Half-Life/Mass Effect Universe Fan Fiction, which will lead directly to its sequel, Salvation II: Project Prometheus. These episodes and sequel take place OUTSIDE of the Mass Effect 3 continuity. Characters property of their respective companies, Half-Life created by Valve and Mass Effect created by Bioware.

****Chapter 29: Enemy is Everywhere (Part II)****

****Shepard's Rave****

"Check over there, by the tables!" One of the human guards shouted out, as he roved around the large nightclub interior. "Keep your eyes open. They could be anywhere!"

As the numerous patrolmen fanned out in search of the unnamed stragglers, the already dim blue glow within the club began to fade into a pitch black darkness. As the light ebbed, there came a sound; Ksssst! A low hissing noise that arose within the club from several tiny jets around the floor, which rapidly began exuding a thick layer of fog.

"What the fuck?!" "Who's doing that?!" "What's going on?!" "Can anybody see anything?!" Several of the officers began shouting out in the darkness, in a disorientated panic, as they spun around, back and forth, flailing their weapons about like paranoid fanatics.

"Calm down, all of you!" One of them shouted out in a more collected, composed, and authoritative tone, as a brilliant beacon of white light, from his omni-tool, pierced the cloaking darkness. From his lead, several other rays of omni-lights abruptly appeared soon thereafter, whilst the thick blanket of accumulating fog continued to swallow up the floor.

"They're back stage!" The stoic, authoritative officer calmly imparted, as his visage was made visible in waving beams of light, which through the dark like spotlights. He was a dark-skinned, statuesque human with a furrowed brow, a burly build, and a towering stature.

"Krel'ac!" He barked to a nearby salarian and human officer pair. "Go check it out! Take Chalmers with you!" The apparent superior ordered, motioning towards the back, with a pointed finger.

The salarian turned and looked to the nearby human - a scrawny, cow-hearted male, whose eyes opened wide upon reception of the perilous order.

Gulp! The sound of the two swallowing at something in their throats could almost be heard amidst the eerie hiss of the fog jets, as they turned and cautiously made for the backstage door.

The fog was heavy and thick now, as it canvassed the floor like a broad, gray blanket. Even the full intensity of the multiple omni-tool flashlights did very little to penetrate this laden, cloudy haze now, as the two subservient guards practically tip-toed their way towards the rear. Their heads swiveled rapidly, from side to side, as they held their drawn weapons out in front of them, clutched within trembling hands.

"RARGH!" POW! A sudden scream came, followed by a single firearm discharge, as the salarian was sucked down into the fog, like a swimmer being dragged under the waves, by a hungry ichthyosaur.

"W-Wh-What the fuck!?" The human officer yelled out, as he shuffled around, in place, searching for his vanished accomplice. "Krel'ac? KREL'AC!? Where are you?!"

"What happened?!" The hearty voice of their human superior demanded,

from the opposite side of the room, near the entrance.

"It's Krel'ac! He's gone!"

"What do you mean GONE?!"

"I-I-Iâ€¦ I don't know!" The human subordinate stuttered in panicked response. "One second he was here, and then-Whoa-wha!" He suddenly jumped, with a start, as he aimed his weapon frantically down at the floor. "Something grabbed my leg! Something just grabbed my leg man! There's someone else in here!"

"Chalmers, call the hell down! You're letting them get inside your he-"

"WHOAAA!"

Again, like the shrieking wail of a condemned soul being dragged down into the unforgiving depths of hell, a scream echoed throughout the room, followed by the muffled sound of something breaking, as Officer Chalmers was sucked down into the abysmal, murky fog.

"Holy shit!" "What the hell's going on!?" "We gotta get the fuck outta here!"

Suddenlyâ€¦ As the panicked voices of the anxious officers coalesced, the beat of music began to play... It started as a low, suppressed beat, that gradually began to crescendo.

A pair of tri-fingered hands systematically flew across a mixing board, keying in buttons, turning up dials, and shifting up sliders. One by one, a panel of switches was flicked on, as the vibrant, visual manifestation of the musical sound spectrum began dancing on-screen - painting its colorful reflection on an onlooking lavender faceplate. Outside, within the club itself, the low, muffled beat grew to a blaring, synthesized roar - A fast-paced, surging rhythm that thrilled the blood, moved the body, and deafened the ear.

All across the vast Mezzanine Deck, and even on decks above and below, throngs of mutinous guards, patrolling the grounds, tuned their ears, and turned their eyes up towards the ceiling, as the muffled sound of music thumping through the walls garnered their attention. Like the lustful call of a siren calling sailors to their demise, the subtle melody began to draw every officer in to the same destination: The Lumoria Lounge.

The guards in the room continued to look back and forth at each other, as more and more reinforcements came pouring in through the front doors, by the second. Amidst the blaring noise, they could be seen trying to shout at each other, but the music was just far too powerfulâ€¦

Suddenly, a blinding white light began pulsating at a daunting rate - lighting the entire room up with a brilliant luminance for a split second, before immediately choking it back into pitch darkness. Rapidfire glimpses of one another was all they could catch, as the fluttering light strobed on and off. A turian guard swiveled his head around in a frenzy, at the heart of the dancefloor, as the dizzying light pulsated. One moment, in the light, he was alone. The next a tall, human figure appeared behind him. A flash of light later, and

the turian was glimpsed, struggling to pry the human's thick arm off his neck. And with a blink, they were both goneâ€|

In the midst of the dizzying maelstrom of lights and smoke, as the traitorous officers began disappearing one by one, a trio of slender, mechanical warriors systematically panned their gaze across the room.

[VISUAL INPUT CORRUPTED - SWITCHING TO INFRARED SENSORS] - a heads-up display within the LOKI's optic interfaces read, as the smoke and fluttering lights quickly gave way to a high contrast nocturne of dull gray surroundings, and bright white figures.

The Mechs' target tracking systems meticulously watched the array of humanoid silhouettes bumbling around. in a dazed frenzy, like corralled shee trying to evade a prowling wolf. All except for one. A lone, white figure they detected scuttled across the floor, in a prone position, to an unsuspecting victim. As he neared his target, he dove into a combat roll for a rapid gain of ground, before popping up directly behind his target, dragging him down to the ground, and twisting his head in a violent, jerking motion, leaving him limp and lifeless.

[IFF PROTOCOLS INITIATED]

At that moment, several of the white, humanoid blotches turned green within the LOKI's optic interface. All except for one. The one systematically eliminating his foes turned a bright shade of redâ€|

"ALL AVAILABLE UNITS!" A turian guard shouted into his radio, with his hand pressed against his ear. "WE NEED IMMEDIATE BACK-UP IN THE LUMORIA ROOM ON THE MEZZANINE DECK! I SAID BACK-UP! WE NEED BACK UP!" He yelled repeatedly, desperately trying to carry his voice over the blaring music. "NO, ON THE MEZZANINE DECK, DAMN IT!"

Unbeknownst to him, the shadow of a man had been cast upon his back, with two hands reaching for his neck. Just then... RATATATATAT! A battery of automatic gunfire suddenly blazed out in their direction, igniting the dark room with tracer fire, and riddling the officer's body with holes; leaving him convulsing on his feet, as silvery blood gushed out of his chest. When the officer finally collapsed to the ground, one of the haphazard rounds sliced a burning gash across the left cheek of the man standing behind the guard, as he darted away for cover.

While the deluge of rounds continued, blazing a trail of bullet pocks along the floor, in the figure's wake, he sprinted towards a set of booths and tables situated around the outer edge of the dancefloor. He vaulted over one of the polished metal tables, sliding across the tabletop, to the other side, as rounds ricocheted off it's surface. Upon reaching the opposite end, he dove down, seeking sanctuary underneath it as he yanked the SMG out of his holster and prepared to return fire.

"Hmphâ€|" Shepard pondered to himself, as he primed his weapon, with a new strategy brewing in his veteran mind. "Those things shot right through that guy to get at meâ€| I wonderâ€|"

"WHERE'D HE GO?!" "WHAT HAPPENED?!" "ANYONE SEE WHERE HE WENT?!" The

befuddled, and fairly panicked voices continued to shout out, under the veil of smoke and darkness.

Meanwhile, The three assault mechs in the room stood motionless for a moment, analyzing the lifeless corpse of the friendly target that had just fallen, by their own mechanical hands.

[ALERT]

>[IFF VIOLATION DETECTED: LEVEL 1 FRIENDLY TARGET
ELIMINATED]
[TARGET ASSESSMENT: ACCEPTABLE CASUALTY -
INCONSEQUENTIAL...]
>[PROCEED WITH OBJECTIVE: ELIMINATE ALL HOSTILE TARGETS BY ANY MEANS
NECESSARY]<p>

"COMMANDER KIM, SIR! THIS IS KALED! WE NEED IMMEDIATE BACKUP ON THE MEZZANINE DECK!" One of the salarian officers cried out, in desperation, into his radio, as the deafening music blared on around him. "NO, NOT THE-THE MEZZANINE DECK, SIR! MEZZ-A-NINE!"

As the salarian futilely tried to get his point across, through his radio, a shadowy figure popped up behind him, a short distance away, amidst a set of tables and chairs. Perhaps the salarian's only saving grace was that his end came quick and painless, as a single round found its mark, boring a hole directly into the base of his skull, with the exit-wound exploding out directly above his right cheek.

"THERE! THERE! HE'S OVER THERE!" A random officer called out and pointed, as Kaled's departed body collapsed to the floor. Every single Carmenta Illustria Security Official in the room turned their attention and weapons towards the tables. Before even spotting a discernible target, they unleashed hell, in a clumsy and frenzied panic. Table lamps, and knick-knack adornments exploded into tiny bits of shrapnel. The wall and tables were riddled with holes, and many of the various booths, and chairs were completely eviscerated, as an unrestrained, maniacal deluge of gunfire tore out. For nearly a minute, the hellacious assault on the furnishings continued unabated, before the broad-shouldered human leading the pack finally waved his hand in the air calling for a cease-fire.

"HOLD IT! HOLD IT! HOLD YOUR FIRE!" He demanded, flailing his hand over his head. "HOLD YOUR FIRE GOD DAMN IT!"

As the thunderous sound from their weapons slowly drew to a close, every last officer in the room stood holding their breaths, watching the demolished sitting area for some sign of life. But none came. If it wasn't for the blaring music drilling in their ears, they'd swear they could hear the sound of a pin drop.

"ONE OF YOU GO CHECK IT OUT!" The bulky human pack-leader ordered, as they all continued looking on. "NO WAY HE SURVIVED THAT!"

The head officer looked back at his steadfast troops, waiting for one of them to bravely volunteer. But each of them just stood in place, looking back and forth at one another - none showing the slightest inkling of wanting to go.

"WHAT ARE YOU COWARDS WAITING FOR?!" He barked, in a rage, with an angry shrug. "YOU KNOW HE'S DEAD! JUST GO MAKE SURE!"

"â€¦"

"..."

"FINEâ€¦!" He irately conceded. "Bunch'a marysâ€¦ I'LL GO!" He grumbled under his breath, before snarling in a rage.

With a puffed out chest, and a bolstered strut, he strolled over towards the table where the maverick straggler was last spotted, and took a cautious look around. As he moved closer to the table, he crouched down and took a look underneath it, spotting nothing except for the single, silvery pole extending up from the table's small, circular base. Not that it WOULD'VE be easy to see anything mired by the fog in the darkened room. Still, with the threat here dismissed, he slowly made his way towards the next table over. As he approached it, and prepared to look down, the edge of the table unexpectedly teetered - thrust up like the rapidly elevating end of a see-saw, which belted him in the jaw, and sent him reeling back - stunned and hurting. Without warning, that same table was hoisted up, off the ground, and angled upright, on it's edge, like a giant shield, before charging forward, towards the punchdrunk officer like the cowcatcher on a locomotive.

The blunt tabletop careened straight into the treacherous officer, sending him flying off his feet. Again, a panicked flurry of gunfire rang out, as the multitude of guards reactively unloaded their collective payloads on the table. Most of the rounds ricocheted off of the table's silvery surface, leaving small, deep pocks. But as the perennial barrage continued, eventually the table's integrity began to weaken, giving way to several swiss-cheese like punctures. The table then seemed to drop to the ground, on it's edge, and slowly rolled to the side, like a giant coin. As it rolled away, the traitorous troops were taken aback to see neither person standing there behind it, nor corpse laying underneath it.

"WHAT HAPPENED?! WHERE IS HE?!" The sturdy human leader demanded, as he scampered back to his feet, wobbling in place. "WHERE'D HE GO, THAT COWARD?!"

He expelled a horrified gasp, when he heard the abrupt voice practically whisper in his ear. "Right behind youâ€¦!"

He suddenly felt an arm, thicker than his own, wrap around his neck, as his gun was painfully wrenched out of his grip. Before he even knew what was happening, he felt himself being forcibly held up, as he watched the trio of mechs on the opposite end of the room raise their weapons, and take aim directly at him.

"NO!" A hoarse scream managed to escape his lips, just before a fusillade of thermal rounds drilled into his body and face, leaving him gushing on his feet, like a crimson fountain.

With his felled victim still in his arms, John raised his own weapon, and returned fire, striking one of the mechs dead center of it's face - causing its head to explode into a shower of sparks and debris, before it plopped to the floor like a knocked over toolchest. With the overzealous officer no longer of any use to him, Shepard allowed him to drop to the floor, lifeless and unrecognizable, before diving to the ground, and disappearing amidst the shroud of mist once

more.

"WHO THE HELL IS THIS GUY?!" A panic-stricken salarian officer cried out, as he spun about, waving a trembling gun around the room. It was at that moment, that he was overcome with the strangest feeling - the kind of feeling one gets when they have eyes on their back. He then looked up, and to his dire chagrin, noticed the two remaining mechs, with their weapons aimed directly at his skull.

"STOP! WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!"

No sooner had he spit the words out, than RTATATATATAT! - a barrage of molten steel tore through his body, like BBs through an aluminum can. As fog poured out, onto the floor, and lights and sound overloaded the senses to the brink of disarray, a lone salarian body spasmed in agony - bathed in the flashing light of muzzle fire.

Again, the IFF violation was of no-consequence to the mechanized soldiers, as John Shepard dove to the ground - concurrent with the collapse of his salarian absorber. Using the mist and the already accumulating bodies of officers as cover, he continued to navigate across the fog-shrouded dance floor.

"WHAT THE FUCK!" He heard an anxious voice yell out. A voice which he zeroed in on for his next target. "THOSE THINGS JUST KILLED TAL'VYK!"

Throughout the tempest of bedlam and confusion - more and more Illustria Security Officers, as well as handfuls of LOKI mechs continued to pour in the front door. Each one that entered soon found themselves alarmed and aghast, as they actually began to stumble over the fallen corpses of their maligned brothers in arms.

They watched, in horror, as a shadowy figure rose out of the mist behind one of their fellow officers, like the grim spectre of death itself, only to be spotted by the mech's targeting systems. Indifferent to friend or foe, they'd detect their target and open fire - shooting through anyone or anything in their path to try and hit their mark - though failing to do so every time. Again, and again the scenario played out. A dark silhouette grows behind an unsuspecting victim, which leads to their abrupt execution at the hands of the inept machines.

"WHAT THE FUCK'S GOING ON!?" Another terror-mired voice cried out. "THESE THINGS ARE TAKING _US _OUT!"

"SHOOT THE DAMN THINGS!"

With that, Shepard's mind game bore its fruit, as the Carmenta Illustria's Security Force turned their own weapons on their 'allied' LOKI Mech Units. The pulsing light from more than a dozen firearms lit up the entire room like New Years Night, at the stroke of twelve, as the slender, silvery men were gunned down. Showers of sparks, and bits and pieces of shrapnel and debris erupted across the room, as one by one, the mechs began to collapse to the floor - nothing but smoking, smouldering pieces of scrap metal. Commander Shepard rushed away from the crossfire - seeking sanctuary in a hidden back corner, near the backstage entrance. There hunkered down and took a moment to catch his breath, as he chuckled snidely a bit, to himself.

A large cluster of uniformed officers hurried down a rear employee access hallway, towards the Lumoria Room's back door. Even through the sealed metal door, the loud, blaring sound of music was not hard to track down. True, it may have been a little muffled through the walls, but with the Lumoria Room being the only source of music on this entire deck, it was exceedingly simple to pinpoint.

Leading the pack of guards, numbering about twelve or so, was a rugged looking, dark-skinned turian, with pale green markings under his eyes, and spanning down the bridge of his nose. The troop's full-on sprint slowed to a jog, and eventually came to a stop altogether, as they reached the source of the music.

"Alright, this is the place." The turian at the fore declared, as he approached the Lumoria's locked rear door. "While those other guys pile in the front and get themselves killed, we'll sneak in through here, and get the drop on these assholes." He began to elaborate, with an arrogant air, and a cocksure grin about him. "You guys ready?"

"Sure, butâ€¦ It's locked." A dubious salarian spoke up from the small crowd, as he pointed a thumb at the bright-red holopanel on the door.

"So we unlock it, genius!" The turian doyen dictated, annoyed, as he materialized his omni-tool on his unarmed hand. "We're Illustria Security. Master access, remember?!" He retorted, snickering, and rolling his eyes condescendingly.

"Oh, rightâ€¦!"

"Nowâ€¦ What is it you humans say?" He began again, glancing at a few of his human cohorts in the small congregation, as he raised his weapon and primed it for combat. "Rock and Roll!"

He turned and pressed the holographic omni-tool ring surrounding his hand, to the bright red holopanel on the door, when suddenly...
KZzZzZzZT!

The very INSTANT contact was made, a powerful jolt was sent surging through the turian's body. His eyelids split wide open - etching a look of intolerable agony on his twitching face. He clenched his teeth to the point of shattering them, as saliva began to foam and spew from his mouth. His every artery bulged, and his every muscle tightened, as the sound of a steady electrical buzz could be heard. The other officers watched in shock and awe, as the turian clung to the door, spasming and convulsing, with smoke actually beginning to seep out from under his uniform. Suddenly, with an eruption of sparks, the sizzling turian was sent flying across the hall - slamming back-first, against the opposite wall, before sliding down, a lifeless pile of smouldering, smoking flesh.

"Oh my god!" A female human guard shrieked, as she rushed over to the turian, sitting limp on the floor, with his head drooped over his chest. She crouched down before him, and immediately pressed her index and middle finger to the side of his neck, to check for a pulse.

"Ahâ€¦!" She cried out, as she immediately retracted her hand after

burning her fingers on his hot flesh. It was like touching a piece of flambeed steakâ€|

"Oh godâ€|" She uttered, after a brief silence, as she gulped and shook her singed fingers. "He'sâ€| He's deadâ€|! He's dead!"

The troop of blackguards seemed to exhale a collective gasp, after having witnessed the electrifying execution of one of their own; seemingly without the slightest bit of effort on the part of the renegade stragglers.

"Oh, to hell with this..." The dubious salarian was the first to remark. "To hell with this! I ain't going in there!" He proclaimed again, as he turned around, and began forcing his way through the group, before darting off down the hall, with his tail between his legs.

The remaining guards seemed to stop and share a brief, uneasy glance - looking to each other for answers. But the only things they found in each other's eyes were more questions, and a foreboding impression of dread. At that moment, they followed suit in the salarian's footsteps, turned tail, and ranâ€|

"Did you hear something?" Matty beckoned, worriedly â€" turning towards the back door as he stood beside Tali. His little hands gripped at the edge of the control console, while she worked it feverishly â€" watching the fruits of her actions culminate on screen. Matty, on the other hand, was barely tall enough to glimpse the controls, over the edge of the console.

"Oh, I wouldn't worry, kresha." She reassured, as her hands masterfully glided, and danced around the mixing console with the guise of someone who's been working one of these machines for years. "No one's going to be getting through that door."

"What are you doing? Can I help?" The small boy then asked, as he rose up to the balls of his feet, and the tips of his toes, trying to look over the console, and the screen above it.

"Uh, no little oneâ€| No, you probably shouldn't see what John's doing out there." She replied, hesitantly, as she watched another officer on the screen get dragged under the densely settled fog, like a stray swimmer in great white waters.

"What's he doing?"

"Like he saidâ€"" She began, as she flicked a switch, causing an array of rainbow colored laser beams to suddenly light up, and dance around the club. "â€"he's teaching the bad policemen a lesson... Ooh, I can actually control these!" She exclaimed enthusiastically, as she took hold of a small, holographic wheel, which worked like a joystick that operated the colorful rays of laser light.

Officers continually rushed into the boisterous room of pulsing lights and pounding beats â€" weapons drawn, eyes peeled, and sweat and chills running down the back of their necks. As they bolted in, they watched in astonishment as their numbers were thinned out, one by one, by some unseen phantom.

"HEY DON'T TRUST THOSE THINGS!" A panicked, drell officer yelled out,

as he watched an asari comrade walk in, with a pair of LOKI mechs by her side. "SHOOT 'EM! QUICK! THEY'LL TURN ON YOU!" He shouted over the music, as he raised his weapon at the thin, metal men.

Giving no thought to logic or reason, the asari officer that had walked in turned to the two mechs, and rapidly backed away, with her gun raised. When she was clear of them, both her and the drell opened fire and senselessly decommissioned the two mechanical combatants.

"WHAT'S GOING ON IN HERE!?" She shouted out, as she turned to the drell.

"THEY'RE IN HERE SOMEWHERE!" The drell answered. "THE STRAGGLERS! THEY'RE HIDING OUT, TAKING US OUT! THEY TURNED THE MECHS ON US SOMEHOW!"

"HOW MANY?!"

"I DON'T KNOW! AT LEAST TEN OR TWENTY! WE CAN'T TELL!"

Suddenly, a blinding beam of red laser light sliced across the dance floor, and made its way directly into the drell's eyes, whilst a separate green laser simultaneously flew into the asari's, as if both their eyes had targets painted on them.

"ARGH!" "MY EYES!" They shouted in unison, as they were blinded by the intense beams. As they stumbled about, distracted, they never noticed Shepard's shadowy outline emerging from the murky haze.

POW! POW! The muzzle flash from his gun painted his scarred and chiseled face in a bright, orange glow for a split second, as his shots found their mark, dismissing the two maligned guards, before he once more disappeared into the darkness.

Lights of red, green, and blue " orange, yellow, and cyan suddenly began to spread across the room with the vicious intent of blinding their victims, as if they had a mind of their own. The guards in the room would see a beam of light slice its way to them, before being daunted by the intense light. As they regained their speckled vision, they could only catch glimpses of their fellow compatriots being taken out one by one by what must've been an army of covert assailants.

A turian rubbed his eyes, in a daze, as he raised his weapon, and began firing wildly at anything that moved. "THEY'RE EVERYWHERE!" He shouted out, in a crazed, demented rant, as he shot at every shadow, every figure " every silhouette skulking in the darkness, friend or foe, that dared to move "Enemy is everywhere...!" He whispered to himself, huffing and heaving in a panicked state of madness. "ENEMY IS EVERYWHERE!"

All he could see, as his eyes struggled to readjust, was a vast room, covered in a laden blanket of gray fog, with several shadowy, armed silhouettes standing, and subsequently falling under a blast from his gun. Many waved their hands at him, pleading for mercy, and begging for him to stop. But there'd be no mercy here today. He was no fool, and he would not fall victim to these ghostly assassins and their trickery. It wasn't clear how many of his own cohorts he was responsible for killing, but surely no less than five fell by his own

hand, and not Shepard's.

Suddenly, a large, theatrical screen at the front of the club, just above the stage, lit up with pre-recorded images of sultry, scintillating asari, human, and turian women, dancing in alluring outfits, in synchronous rhythm to the beat of the music. As the enticing ladies danced vigorously for an absent crowd, a darkened silhouette suddenly bolted across, in front of the screen, from one side of the stage to the other.

"I SEE YOU, YOU BASTARD!" The crazed turian shouted out, as he raised his weapon, and pulled back on the trigger repeatedly.

POW! POW! POW! POW! The shots passed straight through the illusive imagery on the holographic screen, leaving the wall behind it riddled with bullet pocks.

In the midst of the bedlam, the confusion, and the sheer lunacy that had gripped the Illustria Security team, the few officers left standing in the room quickly acknowledged defeat to what was surely a ghostly legion of trained assassins, and one by one, fled the room.

It wasn't long before the room was empty again, save for the mangled bodies strewn across the floor, and a lone, deranged turian, left behind in the mouth of madness, at the center of the abandoned club.

Click. Click. Click. Click. Click.

His empty weapon failed to bear fire, as he waved it about in all directions, repeatedly pulling back on the trigger. He quivered, and shook, in a horror-stricken frenzy - his empty eyes staring blankly into space, and his face perpetuated in fear. As the music blared on, he watched as a ghastly gargoyle rose up out of the mist, before him, like a demon spawn rising from the foggy depths of hell itself. It stood twelve feet tall, if it stood an inch. An awful, and terrifying creature; eyes aglow with crimson red, claws glistening like daggers, razor fangs dripping with venom, and its breath aflame with demonic fire. The beast fanned its dreaded wings out, before the lonely turian guard - encroaching upon him like an angel of darkness.

"No! Please!" He begged, trembling, with tears in his eyes, as he held his depleted gun shaking out in front of him. The monster continued on towards him - no fear, no mercy - until the barrel of the officer's gun was buried deep into the monster's stone-hard chest. The creature reached up, and wrapped his hand around the barrel of the officer's weapon, before slowly pulling it out of his grip.

"Please! Please! No! No! No!" He sobbed, as he cradled his face into his palms, and began rocking back and forth before Shepard - a quivering, blubbering, broken mass.

The Commander turned towards the front of nightclub, and made two quick slicing motions across his throat - a gesture that the quarian looking on backstage quickly interpreted.

"...It's alright." He mercifully bestowed to the traumatized officer

- beginning to dismantle his sidearm, piece by piece, as the deafening music suddenly cut off, leaving both their ears ringing. "It's over now..."

The turian slowly pulled his hands down, off of his eyes, over his mouth, and almost immediately, his terror of the grave began to abate. He was surprised to see that the figure before him was not some sort of infernal, demonic being from the nether reaches of the underworld, but merely a man - a lone man with steel in his spine, and a benevolence in his eyes.

"Y-You're not gonna kill me?!" He beseeched, with his trembling hands curled up, out in front of him, like a fearful child.

"I will if I have to." John affirmed, without qualm, as he pointed a rigid finger in the turian's face. "So listen real, real goodâ€¦ I have a message for whoever's pulling your strings, as I'm sure they're aware of what's happened here. I want the hostages freed. And I want ALL of you to surrender yourselvesâ€¦" He sternly explained, as he stared a cold gaze through the turian, while brashly waving his finger in his face. "That doesn't happen, and I promise you... I PROMISE you, you'll all end up like those who died - needlessly - in this room tonight. Even if I have to kill the lot of you, one by one. Do you understand?"

The turian guard just stood there for a moment, his pupils batting back and forth; seemingly trying to process all that had happened, and the things that the man before him was saying.

"Damn it, I said DO YOU UNDERSTAND?!" Shepard fiercely berated, as he grabbed two fistfuls of the turian's shirt, and yanked him up to his face.

"...Y-Yes! Yes!" The turian finally acknowledged - nodding emphatically, and putting his hands up, in a surrendering fashion. "You got it! Commander Kim's the one in charge! I'll radio him right now! And-and-and I surrender! I give up! Please, just don't ki-AUGH!"

POW! POW! POW!

The thundercrack of three rapid gunshots quickly silenced the succumbing turian. His body suddenly went limp in Shepard's hands. His lax head drooped back, flaccid and limp, and a small trickle of silvery blood overflowed from his mouth, and ran down his chin.

As he let the officer down, Shepard looked up to catch a glimpse of four oncoming LOKI mechs, which he never noticed entering the room.

POW! POW! POW! POW! The shots rang out again - aimed for the infrared blotch of John's figure, in their targeting sensors. Finding himself in the precarious position of standing at the center of the dancefloor, with nothing suitable to provide him sanctuary nearby - the intrepid Commander dropped the turian's lifeless body, and made a break towards the right-hand side of the room, and the bar counter nestled against it.

The LOKI's glowing red, figure 8 optic sensors tracked Shepard's blistering movement across the dancefloor, as their brandished

weapons continued to discharge. POW! POW! POW! POW!

As fast and nimble as Commander Shepard was - he was still not fast enough to avoid the calculated onslaught of slugs. He knew, only too well, the feeling of molten steel piercing his flesh, as a round found its mark, and drilled straight into the side of his broad, right upper-arm - rending his sinewy flesh like tissue paper. Instantly, the bullet exploded out of the inside of his arm, leaving a large exit wound, and splattering his face with his own blood. But even this wasn't enough to slow him down however, as he gritted his teeth in pain, and pressed forward, towards the nearby bar, which, in spite of being only a few feet away, seemed tantalizingly out of reach. Just before he could reach it, he felt the unforgiving, excruciating bite of a second bullet. His legs buckled, like toothpicks under his weight, as a round pierced the thick, muscular calf of his left leg.

"ARGH!" He cried out, in agony, as he toppled to the ground, bleeding and wounded. With his eyes clenched shut, his teeth grit to their breaking point, and his forehead dripping with sweat, he rolled onto his stomach, and fervently began dragging himself across the floor. While the bullets continued to ricochet off the floor around him - many coming dangerously close to his head - Shepard gallantly clawed his way around the barroom counter, painting the floor with a crimson streak of his own blood, like a road striping truck etching lines on a highway.

"Oh Keelah, no! John!" Tali exclaimed, under her breath, as she watched the mechanized soldiers unleash a torrent of gunfire towards the bar. She had watched Shepard drag himself around the counter, to find cover. But from the camera's vantage point angle, she could no longer glimpse any sign of him - living or dead...

30. Chapter 30: Enemy is Everywhere Part III

****Salvation: Episode I - The Taking of the Carmenta
Illustria****

Disclaimer: This fan-fiction is part of an episodic series taking place after Salvation: A Half-Life/Mass Effect Universe Fan Fiction, which will lead directly to its sequel, Salvation II: Project Prometheus. These episodes and sequel take place OUTSIDE of the Mass Effect 3 continuity. Characters property of their respective companies, Half-Life created by Valve and Mass Effect created by Bioware.

****Chapter 30: Enemy is Everywhere (Part III)****

****Assembly Line of Death****

"Bosh'tet, where is he?!" Tali pleaded, nearly crying, as she feverishly cycled through the camera feeds from every possible angle to try and catch a glimpse of her imperiled love.

"What?! What's going on?! What's happening?!" The fearful and inquisitive boy at her side beckoned, as he anxiously bounced up, on the balls of his feet, trying to get a better look at what Tali was looking at.

Without responding, the panicked quarian looked down at the boy, then immediately back up at the screen. She swiveled her head in all directions, as if trying to formulate a plan, or simply trying to figure out what to do next.

"Matty!" She finally called out, as she turned to him. "Stay here, okay! Wait for me here. I'll be right back!" She insisted, as she drew the SMG off of her hip. "Don't move! No matter what, just stay here!"

"But Tali, I-!" Before he could even finish, Tali had turned and sprinted towards the door, leaving the boy alone again, in the cramped control room. "Aww, not again!" He muttered to himself, as he gripped the edge of the mixing console, and tried to tippy-toe for a look over it.

Commander Shepard sat bleeding under the bar counter-top, with his back against the inside panel. Blood oozed between his fingers, as he held the upper part of his right arm clenched in his left hand. His legs were stretched out, as he sat, with a glossy puddle of red fluid growing under his left calf. He shook his head roughly - trying to cling to consciousness, as he felt himself grow dizzy and lightheaded, with his eyelids weighing down over his pupils. Blinking rapidly, he reached for the weapon on his holster, only to realize that it wasn't there!

"Damn it!" He grumbled, in a groggy voice, to himself, as the incessant sound of gunfire continued on - shattering glasses and bottles which were neatly aligned against the back wall. He wasn't even sure how or when he'd lost his weapon - but it quickly dawned on him that he was in urgent need of a strategy. Otherwise he'd just sit here, and bleed to death.

"Hey bosh'tets!" He suddenly heard an all too familiar voice yell out, with a fury. "Over here!"

"...Tali!" He exclaimed, as there came a sudden, but surely momentary, ceasefire. John scrambled to get to his feet, only to lose the strength halfway up and collapse back down. Ever unwilling to yield to his own physical limitations, he tried again - dragging himself forward onto his hands and knees, before reaching up to the countertop edge and grasping it tightly in a bloodied fist. With his arm trembling, and his shoulder and leg throbbing excruciatingly, he heaved himself to his feet, with every fiber of his being. As he stood up, he watched a quartet of mechs standing near the entrance of the Lumoria Room, facing off, like gunslingers at high noon, against an armed quarian at the opposite end of the club, near the stage.

"Tali, look out!" He shouted - watching the mechs synchronous, mechanical motions, as they raised their weapons and aimed them, in unison, at his beloved. The ratatat of gunfire exploded again, as they unleashed a rapid volley in Tali's direction. As the rounds rippled off of her kinetic shielding, quickly draining them, she had already raised her own weapon in retaliation. She, however, was not aiming back at the band of metal men - she was aiming at something suspended high above their heads. POW! POW! POW! POW! Four of her shots echoed through the dance hall, as a deluge of shimmering, luminescent white sparks rained down, from the ceiling. A hefty steel truss, mounted on the ceiling, and laden with an array of lighting

and ambience fixtures, partially broke free from its suspension. As Tali's shielding dwindled dangerously close to 0, one end of the sturdy framework swung down from the shadowy rafters, like a steely, bladed, pendulum.

John watched, in awe, as the heavy bracket came slicing down, upon the metal men. Like a golf club perfectly striking a ball, steel creaked and grinded, as the four figures were completely decimated, and reduced to little more than a pile of scrap, where they stood. With the weight of the framework being too much for the ceiling to support, the other point of suspension quickly gave way, as the entire truss suddenly tore from the rafters, and collapsed down to the floor, with a resounding thud, that shook the very ground they stood upon.

"Hmph!" Tali breathed triumphantly, as she holstered her weapon, like a triumphant sheriff standing over a fallen outlaw. She immediately and instinctively glanced over towards the bar, desperate to spot some sign of her love. A sign that she quickly spotted indeed, when she saw him limping, at a fevered pace, around the bar counter, towards her, with a look of agony engraved on his face.

"John!" She cried out, as she sprinted towards him. Shepard reached the end of the counter, and continued on past it. Without anything left to provide him support or balance, however, he nearly lost his footing, as his lacerated leg buckled on him once more. Before he could stumble to the floor, Tali rushed in, hooking him by the waist, and draping his arm around her shoulders, quickly giving him the support he would never admit to needing.

"Tali!" He began, in a pained and trailing voice. "Are you alright?!"

"Yes. Yes John, I'm fine!" She adamantly reassured, as she helped him hobble along. "It's YOU I'm worried about!"

"Where's the boy!? Where's Matthew?"

"He's okay too." She declared, as she looked down to see the blood dripping off his right hand, and oozing out of the back of his left pant leg. "He's back stage. He's fine. But you! Oh keelah, you're losing a lot of blood!"

"I'm fine. It's nothing!"

"Oh, shut up!" She exclaimed, with a mix of anger, frustration, and panic, as they continued on together, as one. "Just come on. I think I've got some medi-gel. We'll get you to the back and patch you up."

"HALT." A monotonous, metallic voice, suddenly declared, from far behind them. "INTRUDERS DETECTED. PLEASE RELINQUISH YOUR WEAPONS AND PREPARE TO BE EXECUTED."

"Oh no!" Tali exclaimed, in frustration, as both she and Shepard turned looked back, on instinct. "How many of those darn things are on this ship?!"

An ambiguous number of mechs marched their way in through the front door. It wasn't clear how many this small squadron was comprised of,

due to the mangled steel framework obstructing both John and Tali's view, as well as the LOKI's paths. But it was surely an obstacle that would not take long for the slender automatons to surmount.

"Tali, go!" The inexorable Commander implored, as he withdrew his arm from around Tali's shoulders, hopping on one leg, as he turned to face his next challenge. "Get Matthew, and slip out the back! I'll buy you some time..."

"Oh, like hez'lak you will!" The equally unbreakable quarian snarled, as she rushed back to Shepard's side - forcibly yanking his arm back around her shoulders. "Come on!" She demanded, as she spun him and herself back around, while pressing on towards the backstage door, with the mechs trailin, not far behind. "I've had enough of your ultra-masculism! Move it soldier, you're coming with me!"

"Tali-!"

"I said move!" She barked, like a reproaching drill instructor, before he could utter another word.

They hobbled along together, at a fevered pace, towards the rear door, as the trailing mechs maneuvered around the obstruction, and targeted the two glowing blotches in their heads up displays.

"Come on! We're almost there." Tali assured, as they reached the swinging door. She could feel him trying his best to carry his weight on his own two legs, but she did her best to pull him back, and bear it all upon herself.

POW! POW! CLINK!

Two gunshots suddenly broke out, as a small shower of sparks erupted over their heads, where one of the shots struck the metallic wall, and ricocheted off.

"Hurry! In!" She shouted, as they reach the black, swinging door, and scurried inside.

"Tali! Mr. John!" An enthused, little voice called out with a mixture of glee and relief, as Matty ran up to greet the two. "You're back! You're! Oh! You! You've got a big cut!" He declared, with fear and concern, as he watched the blood dripping off of Shepard's arm, and pooling around his heels. "Y-y-you need a bandaid! A lot of bandaids!"

"It's fine, buddy. I'm fine!" He explained in a dazed, and groggy voice, as he tried to keep his lead-heavy head upright, and fight his eye's insistence to lose. He didn't even notice Tali opening a compartment on her belt, and pulling a small, pen-like tube out.

"We gotta keep going! Move! Out the ba-Ow!" He shrieked in pain, as he suddenly felt something sharp jab into the side of his thigh, like the sting from a hornet. "Tali, what was th-"

"Adrenal injection." Tali explained, before he could even ask, as she discarded the now empty, useless injecting device on the floor. "Never leave home without it."

Almost immediately, John could feel its effects. His glazed over, fading eyes perked up, reinvigorated. The drowsiness gripping him attenuated, and he could feel his breaths grow less shallow and labored. But his blood continued to flow, as his valiant heart continue to pump.

"Do you think you can stand on your own?!" She beckoned, as she leaned him against the nearby mixing table, gradually and tentatively allowing him to support his own weight. "Just for a moment?"

"Yes. I'm fine Tali, hurry. We gotta go!"

"Alright, just hold on, okay!" She beseeched, in panicked voice, teeming with angst, despite her best efforts to conceal it. "Stay with me, John. I'll be right back!" She assured, as she rushed further into the room, towards the rear exit.

"Matthew!" He said in a soft, throaty voice, that failed to produce the strong, bolstered tone he was known for. "Hand me that - that microphone thing right there." He instructed, as he pointed towards a long, black, aluminum stand for a stage mic.

"Okay!" Matty immediately complied, without a second thought, as he turned to face a myriad of equipment nestled up against the opposite wall. "You mean this thing?" He asked, as he picked out a ball-jointed, rod-like device which stood a fair deal taller than he did.

"Yes! Bring it over to me, please."

The stand's base scraped along the floor, as the brown-haired little boy quickly dragged it over to the enfeebled Commander.

"Thank you." He bestowed, as he quickly reached out and grabbed the stand. That's when he heard the distinctive, repetitive thud of metallic footsteps approaching from the club, on the other side of the swinging door.

"Matty, go to Tali!" He pressingly ordered, as he took hold of the stand and gripped it, as though it were a hiking stick, to support himself. "Tali, quick! Give me your gun!" He urged, as he moved away from the mixing console. "They're coming!"

As the young boy ran behind the lavender veiled quarian, she had already dismantled her makeshift electrified security device. The battery pack that was formerly mounted onto the door was now in her hands, and she was in the processes of manipulating a small holographic panel on the face of the device. With a few rapidfire taps and swipes of her fingers, she turned several slider switches, which were previously adjusted to lower settings, to their top-most capacities. This immediately caused a set of bright red holographic letters, reading; "DANGER - OVERLOAD" to flash on and off emphatically.

With the trembling, overheating device in hand, Tali rushed back towards John and tossed the pulsating apparatus on the ground, which rolled towards the door, coming to a rest just before it.

"Come on, let's go!" She urged, as she hooked his waist, and forcibly yanked his arm, drawing it around her shoulders again.

"What did you just do!?" Shepard asked, as the two hobbled along together, at a frenzied pace, towards the back exit.

"Don't you know me by now?"

The two made a fevered scamper towards the rear exit. With John's body still feeding off the adrenaline, and the added support of the microphone stand acting like a cane, he was able to move at a much faster pace than before. They reached the door, as the approaching thuds of metal footsteps grew louder and closer.

"Matty, stay close to me!" Tali urged the boy who stood waiting by the door, as she reached towards its green holopanel. The door before them slid open with a swish, just as they heard the door behind them fly open, with a whack.

"HALT!" The three heard a robotic voice demand, along with sounds of mechanical whirrs and cocking guns, as they practically dove out of the room, into the narrow back corridor. "INTRUDERS DETECTED. PLEASE RELINQUISH YOUR WEAPONS AND PREPARE TO-" BOOM!

A loud percussion suddenly rattled the entire room, and sent a shockwave across the ground they stood on. It wasn't like the explosion of a grenade or some other incendiary device, however. It was more like the popping crack of a firework, or the sound of a 20th century muffler backfiring. However it may have sounded, it was loud and devastating to say the least, for just as John and Tali turned back around, they saw a dark cloud of noxious smoke build up in the room, as a few sparking pieces of circuitry and charred robotic limbs came flying to the door.

With his arm still strewn around her shoulders, John turned to look at Tali. The expression on his face â€" an opened-eyed, wide-grinned amalgam of disbelief, admiration, and sheer amazement - said it all.

"Wh-wh-what was THAT?!" Matty blurted out, begging what Shepard was already wondering. "What happened?!"

"One of my suit batteriesâ€" Tali offered up a casual explanation, as she frenziedly began working to unfasten a compartment on her belt. "Overloaded so it would explodeâ€"

Shepard chuckled, with a shake of his head. "What'd I tell you, trooper?" He asked, as he looked down at the boy, who stood looking up at the pair, in awe. "This woman is magic."

"Wow...!" Matty exclaimed. "You're BOTH so tough and awesome! You're like superheroes!"

Heedless to any of it, Tali was too focused on her task, as she pulled a small, pistol-shaped device, with an attached tube, out of the compartment on her belt. The tube on the apparatus was red in color, marked with a stylized white cross, much like the ones seen on first-aid stations and on medi-gel labels.

"Hold still, John." Tali ordered, as she tore a plastic cap off of the device in-hand, and squeezed on the small, aluminum trigger. A small dollop of white medi-gel to oozed out of the tip, showing it

was ready to be applied. "Roll up your pant leg for me." She instructed, as she crouched down to his bleeding calf; medi-gel injector in hand.

He shifted the microphone stand he was using as a cane from his left side to his right, as he shifted his weight wholly onto his one good leg. With his free arm, he then gripped a handful of black cloth from his now ripped and rended tuxedo pant leg, and pulled it up.

When he did, Tali couldn't help but wince, as she observed the large gash in the side of his leg, which painted his entire calf and ankle in oozing, crimson red liquid.

"Oh, keelahâ€|" Tali said, in a hushed voice, as she slowly shook her head.

"Oh noâ€|!" Matty's quivering little voice followed up, with a frightened gasp. "You'reâ€| you're hurt real bad! You're not gonna die, are you?!"

"No, hey, of course notâ€|" John reaffirmed, shaking his head, as he held his pant leg rolled up, in his balled fist. "I'm alright, buddy. It's just a little cut. No one's gonna die, okay?"

"Oh John, how do these things keep happeningâ€|?" Tali lamented, under her breath, as she squeezed on the trigger; coating his wound with a steady stream of medi-gel, like a carpenter using caulk to weatherproof a window. She sighed. "...This is an anti-bacterial and anesthetic medi-gel formula. It'll stop the bleeding, dull the pain, and prevent infection. But we're going to need to get you to a doctor as soon as all this is over."

"How many times have we said that, in the past?" John retorted, with a lighthearted chuckle. Tali, on the other hand, had no taste for humor, at the moment.

Just as she put the finishing touches on her liberal application of the white liniment, thus sealing his wound, John glanced up and, to his sugrin, spotted another triad of the seemingly endless LOKI mechs turn the corner at the far end of the narrow corridor, and march towards them.

The Commander held an exhausted gasp in, as his face became painted with frustration. With Tali still hunched over before him, oblivious to their presence, Shepard looked down at her broad hip, and the submachine gun still holstered on it. As he watched the metal men march ever closer, and raise their weapons to fire, John yanked the gun off of her hip, and forced his way past her as if she were a swinging saloon door, to put himself between her and harm's way. Stunned and confused, Tali popped up to finally see what had caused his unexpected alacrity, and watched as he raised the weapon in retaliation.

Quicker than any servo-operated automaton, John pulled back on the trigger, with his one good arm, unleashing a violent torrent of gunfire, which blazed a straight line across the trio, like a buzz-saw through wood. The metal figures jerked and twitched in the onslaught, as their thin, metal frames were pierced and punctured by a fearsome battery of rounds.

It didn't seem to matter though, for as soon as the three fell, four more took their place - turning the corner behind the fallen machines, like an assembly line of death.

"God damn it!" Shepard said, as he exhaled a debilitated sigh, at what seemed to be a short vacation turned never ending nightmare.

"Tali, give me another clip!" He demanded, as he read a holo-display on the weapon, showing he only had two rounds left.

"That's all I had. There aren't anymore!" She exclaimed, as the metal troop marched on towards them, trampling the sparking remains of their fellow automated accomplices in the process. "Come on!" She yelled, as she took Matty by the hand and hooked her other arm around Shepard's. Knowing when to choose his battles, the Commander saw no choice but to retreat. The three of them turned and bolted down the hallway. Tali scooped Matty up in her arms, who in turn, buried his face deep into her shoulders, the same way any fearful child would.

Amazingly, the medi-gel formula Tali had administered did its work remarkably fast. John sprinted down the hallway, side-by-side with Tali almost as if nothing were ever wrong with his leg. What was once a sharp, piercing throe of agony, had dulled to little more than a throbbing, nagging muscular twitch.

The thunderous and abrupt cacophony of gunfire resonated off the walls of the narrow corridor, as the LOKIs opened fire. John and Tali hunkered down as low as they could, without losing forward momentum, as rounds ricocheted above their heads, piercing the bland, metallic walls around them. As they ran for their lives, the corridor came to an end, splitting into a T-Junction.

"This way!" John bellowed, keeping his head tucked down between his shoulders, as rounds continued to fly. He grabbed Tali, and pulled her and Matty around the left corner, and out of the path of the flying bullets.

"In here!" He urged, as he rushed to the very first door he saw, around the immediately corner.

This door was painted white, and was marked with a stylized red cross - again resembling the ones used to mark medi-gel containers. To the right of the door were two large glass pane windows, providing a clear view into the empty and abandoned room.

John flew in through the doorway, pulling Tali along, in tow. Once the three of them were securely situated in the room, he turned back and quickly slid the door shut, just as he heard the thud of pounding metal footsteps approaching.

"Here! Down!" He ordered in an elevated whisper, as he embraced Tali, and pulled her down to the floor along with him. The three of them curled and huddled down on the floor, nestled as tightly against the wall as possible, directly beneath the glass panes of the two sizeable windows.

"They're coming!" Matty exclaimed in a hushed but panicked voice, as the muffled sound of repetitive stomping drew closer and closer.

"Oh no, they're coming! They're gonna get us!"

"Shhhhhâ€|" Tali hissed softly, as she squeezed him tighter, rocking him back and forth as she stroked his hair. "It's okay, kresha. It'll be okayâ€|"

Meanwhile, as the metal march from outside grew louder and louder, John calculated the perils in his mind.

"_Four mechs, two bulletsâ€|" _ He thought to himself, as he gripped the nearly depleted weapon tightly in his hand. "_I can maybe take two out immediately, but I doubt I can overpower the othersâ€|" _He started to look around the room for something he could use as a weapon - aside from a series of examination tables, and some stray medical accoutrements scattered throughout the room, there was little here to meet his requirements. "_I'll take two out, grab one of their weapons, and hopefully finish off the other two before they finish meâ€|" But no matter what happens, I have to get their attention first, before they can target Tali or or the boy. So long as they're safe, that's all that matters..." _

As his mind chattered away with longshot scenarios, the loud, rhythmic march drew to its apex, as the small squadron of mechs turned the corner, and appeared in the window just outside.

The footsteps stoppedâ€|" Tali held a shaking, quivering little boy in her arms. She embraced him as tightly as she could, keeping his head cradled down. She could actually hear his teeth rattle, as if he had just been swept by an icy breeze. Tali reached down to her belt with her one free hand, and withdrew a small, pen-shaped device - her trusty laser cutter. Without the benefit of a weapon, she would resort to other defensive means if confrontation was inevitable, as she often had in the past.

By her side, John gulped and grit his teeth all at once - his forehead glistening with sweat, as he primed his weapon and prepared to defend those he cared for. His eyes narrowed, his chest tightened, and he drew a deep into his lungs, as he listened for the slightest sound. He shifted himself around, going into a prone position on his hands, facing towards the entryway, with the guise of a cheetah in the brush preparing to pounce on its unsuspecting prey.

Outside, the quartet of mechs swiveled their robotic heads around and glanced into the dark and seemingly empty medbay. Their optic sensors performed a quick scan for movement, but with nothing seemingly out of the ordinary here, it didn't take long for their programming to dismiss this as nothing but another vacated room. They turned their heads back to a forward facing position, and continued on in unison.

As the metal stomp of footsteps arose again, and gradually grew distant, the three on the floor shared a collective sigh of reliefâ€|"

31. Chapter 31: The Final Armistice

****Salvation: Episode I - The Taking of the Carmenta
Illustria****

Disclaimer: This fan-fiction is part of an episodic series taking place after Salvation: A Half-Life/Mass Effect Universe Fan Fiction, which will lead directly to its sequel, Salvation II: Project Prometheus. These episodes and sequel take place OUTSIDE of the Mass Effect 3 continuity. Characters property of their respective companies, Half-Life created by Valve and Mass Effect created by Bioware.

****Chapter 31: The Final Armistice****

"Thank the ancestorsâ€¦!" Tali exhaled, as she brushed Matty's hair back. "Are you alright my little one?"

Matty raised his head up from where he had it tucked into her shoulders. His face was a mural perpetuated of fear and sorrow - nose sniffing, chin quivering, eyes red and overflowing with tears...

"I want my mommy and daddyâ€¦!" He sobbed and sniffled, as the tiny teardrops accrued into glossy pools around his eyes, and dripped from his face. "I'm scared. I wanna go homeâ€¦!"

"I know you do, little one, I knowâ€¦!" Tali replied, with a heavy, sorrow-burdened heart, as she wrapped her arms around him again. "We're gonna get you home. You'll seeâ€¦!"

"Stay strong for us, buddyâ€¦! Please... " Shepard pleaded, as he felt a knot unexpectedly creep up into his throat. "You gotta keep strong. This'll be over soon, I promise." He assured, as he raised himself up from a prone to a seated position directly beneath the windows, with both Tali and Matty following suit.

"Come on trooper, hang in thereâ€¦! I know you, you're toughâ€¦!" He continued, as he reached over and massaged the boy's shoulder reassuringly. "We're gonna get through this togetherâ€¦!"

Matty sniffled, as if trying to swallow the tears back into his red eyes. "I'm sorryâ€¦!" He replied, as he brushed the back of his hand, back and forth, across his nose.

"Hey. You've got nothing to be sorry about, okay?" John replied, shaking his head, as he locked eyes with the boy. "You're the bravest little trooper I ever met. As a matter of fact-" He continued, as a smirk grew on his face. "-tell you what. I'm gonna make you an honorary Alliance Navy Cadetâ€¦!"

"Wâ€¦! What's that?"

"Well, an Alliance Cadet is kind of like uhâ€¦!" He paused for a moment, as thought of a way to explain. "Well, they're sort of like the good guys in those cartoons you watch. They're strong, and brave, and everything that you are. So we gotta be tough now, right? And go help those good people that the bad policemen took?"

"Right!" The enthused little boy was quick to respond, with a newfound glee in his voice, and a smile masking his tear-etched face.

"Atta-boy!" Shepard declared, with an approving grin. "So thenâ€¦! As a Commander in the Alliance Navy, I hereby pronounce you Cadet Matthew Farrellâ€¦! Salute." He said, as he followed up with the

gesture, placing his hand to his brow, in tribute to the newest member of the Alliance. Matty looked up to his right, where Tali was seated right beside him, and he found her there paying homage to him with the same exact gesture.

"Hmhmhâ€|" Tali giggled a little under her breath. "Congratulations, kresha!"

"Wowâ€|" Matty exclaimed, in awe, as he too raised his little hand to his brow. "Does that mean I get a gun now too, like General Justice?!"

"Who-hoa!" John and Tali both laughed nervously at the unexpected request. "Easy buddy. Not 'til you're promoted."

"Aw nutsâ€|"

John snickered, as he drew his arm around the boy, and gave him a friendly shake. The three of them sat on the floor of the darkened medbay, beneath the window, trying to take a breath and find a little levity amidst the tempest. It was only now, during the respite, that the stinging jolts shooting through his right arm reminded Shepard of the wound he'd sustained. Knowing full well that a gratifying breather was not a luxury they could afford, at the moment, John turned his head around, and sat up a little higher to peek out of the window. His eyes rose over the bottom threshold of the window, and scanned the hallway outside to make sure the coast was clear, which it was, for now at least.

"Alright, looks like they've cleared out..." John asserted, as he rose to his feet as quickly as he could. He still staggered a little on the way up, but his leg didn't seem to be bothering him so much anymore. It was his arm that was still giving him discord. It was drenched in his own red blood from his shoulder to the tips of his fingers - most of which was drying now, and crusting on.

When he got to his feet, Shepard rushed over to the door - or rather to a small holopanel beside it - and gradually turned one of two small slider switches down. The large, crystal clear glass pane windows slowly began to lose their transparency, as they became blacked out and opaque, like a welder's mask reacting to torchlight. Inversely, he then turned the other of the two switches all the way up, which lit up the bright florescent lights within the room.

"Whewâ€|" John heard Tali exhale a hefty sigh, as she rose to her feet, with Matty close to her side before returning the laser-cutter in hand back to its appropriate compartment on her belt. "I was sure we we're going to have to deal with those last few mechsâ€|" She said, as she bowed and shook her head, while placing her arms akimbo on her hips. "But they didn't even seem to do a thermal scan of the room... Whoever programmed them didn't do a very good job."

"Yeah, well... Lucky us." Shepard remarked with a shrug and a chuckle, that was somewhat mired in pain.

"Well, at least this is a medbay." Tali added, as she turned and glanced about the room. It was much larger than the medbay on the Normandy. It'd have to be to accommodate a ship this size. But the look and feel of it all was very akin. From the several examination

tables, to the scopes and instruments on the counters and desks, to the sheer clean radiance of white that the room exuded.

"Come here, sit down." Tali instructed, as she walked over to the nearest of the 10 examination tables in the room. "I have to take care of that arm before you bleed out or it gets infected."

With no immediate danger looming, and the recurring jolts of pain shooting through his arm growing more and more prevalent, at an increasingly higher frequency, he conceded to the fact that he needed whatever medical attention he could get. He slowly walked towards the nearest examination table, while Tali dug around in the drawers of a small, aluminum trolley for a few needed medical supplies.

"John pushed himself up, onto the examination table, situating himself seated on the edge, as Tali returned with a handful of accoutrements, including alcohol, gauze, bandages, and a new medi-gel canister.

"Are you gonna fix his cuts?" Matty beckoned, as he watched Tali apply a generous amount of isopropyl alcohol solution to one of the gauzes, which quickly filled the room up with a pungent, chemical odor.

"Yep. Just call me Dr. Tali!" She cheerfully affirmed, as she dabbed the wound with the alcohol soaked cloth, in turn causing him to hiss through his teeth and recoil a bit. "So long as he holds stillâ€¦ You big babyâ€¦"

"Hehehâ€¦" John chuckled jovially, as Tali began cleansing his wound. "Soâ€¦" He started again, in the spirit of conversation. "Blowing up your suit battery back thereâ€¦ That's a new one."

"I did it a few times when I was a little girl." Tali replied, still engrossed in her work, tenderly wiping the blood from around his wound, with a gently, wafting caress. "I would overload them and blow them up in a can just to watch 'em explodeâ€¦"

Shepard smiled, as he listened. He watched her nursing him to health - using the utmost care, and the gentlest of touches. He liked the feelingâ€¦ He liked the feeling of having someone to shield and protect - someone to watch over. But more than that, he liked the feeling of having someone wanting to take care of him - the feeling of being loved. A feeling he'd never want to lose...

"Every time I did it, my mother would swear she'd ground me for life if I ever did it again." Tali continued on, as she finished wiping away the dried blood from his arm, leaving it clean and glistening, with a red, watered down puddle on the floor. "Even if it meant forbidding me from taking my pilgrimageâ€¦ She never did thoughâ€¦"

"Hmphâ€¦" John exhaled a muffled laugh, as Tali dabbed his tender, fleshy wound dry with a new gauze, and picked up the medi-gel canister. "I always knew you were a trouble maker, Taliâ€¦ Probably why I fell for you."

"Oh, sure..." She replied, with a tone of cheerful sarcasm, as she squeezed out a frothy dollop of white gel onto his wound. "Everything you've stirred up across the galaxy, and I'M the trouble

maker."

John smiled. All of a sudden, PANG! A loud metallic thud echoed out, causing Matty to jump, startled, just as Tali finished applying the medi-gel. An air conditioning grate had unexpectedly flown off from the ceiling, hitting the floor in front of them, as if it had been kicked out of place.

John jumped to his feet, instinctively placing himself between Tali and Matty as he raised his two-round bearing weapon, and aimed it up at the now gaping, shadowy hole.

"What was that?!" Matty cried out, as he hid behind Tali with his head tucked between his shoulders, dreading whatever horrible thing was going to emerge from the hole.

Suddenly, a pair of legs donned in a pair of filthy, tattered, black tuxedo pants became visible, as they emerged from the opening. All at once, the legs became the full figure of a man. He swung himself out, and his scuffed up, black dress shoes touched down on the hard, med-bay floor with a solid thump.

"Wellâ€¦" The battered and bruised figure in the targeting visor cordially began, as he steadied himself, and stood upright. "Hello, there."

"Gordon!" Shepard exclaimed, nearly shouting from excitement, with a mixture of relief and jubilation on his face, as he immediately lowered his weapon. "Damn, am I glad to see you!"

Before the repartee could proceed any further, a second figure suddenly swung out of the grate, and dropped into view, besides Gordon. This figure's once shimmering, silken, ruby colored dress was now in tatters - riddled with holes and tears, and begrimed with soot, dust, and blood. Its condition was fairly akin to that of Gordon's own evening wear. His shirt and pants were ripped in several places. His midnight black dress pants, and his once pristine white dress shirt were now mottled with several gray blotches, and his entire rolled up, left sleeve, was permeated with the prevalent cerise stain of his own blood. Their faces and bodies were scratched and bruised up, and they both seemed to hunch over in pain a little, in spite of their best efforts to keep a steady posture. But as always, throughout every peril, their resolve remained unscathedâ€¦

"Miranda!" John jubilantly blurted out, again. "We've been looking for -"

"Shepard!" The battered operative quickly retorted with an angry scowl, as she rushed forward, past a dumbstruck Gordon. "I've got a bone to pick with you!" She asserted indignantly, as she pointed a patronizing finger in Shepard's face. "How dare you book us on this cruise liner from hell!"

"Now wait a minute, Mirandaâ€¦! It's not like -"

"Is this your idea of a relaxing vacation?!" The vexed Miranda quickly fired back, refusing to be interrupted. "Did you PLAN this?! You can't go more than a week without having some sort of war to fight, that you had to book us the voyage of the damned, is that

it?!"

"That's enough, Miranda!" Tali barked, with authority before John could even try to defend himself. "You're scaring Matty!"

"...I'm sorry, I'm scaring WHO?!" Miranda queried, with a confused look and a furrowed brow, as she and Gordon both looked over to her.

At first glance, they couldn't deduce who or what she was talking about. But upon closer inspection, they could almost make out the diminutive outline of something stirring behind her.

"It's alright, kresha. Don't be afraidâ€¦" Tali delicately assured, as she reached around behind her back, lightly coaxing him out from behind her with a gentle tap. "She didn't mean to scare you. These are friends of ours. They're not gonna hurt you..."

Trusting her word with all the faith in the world, young Matthew's head slowly peeked out from around Tali's hip, before slowly stepping out completely.

"Ohâ€¦" Miranda replied, with a newly docile, pacified tone. "So who's the boyâ€¦?"

"Mianda. Gordon. This is Matthew..." John began to explain, as he stepped over to him and Tali. "He got left behind when the ship got taken over." He elaborated, as he patted Matty on the back, and rubbed his shoulders. "We're trying to put a stop to this and get him back to his parentsâ€¦"

"I seeâ€¦" Miranda acknowledged.

"Hi there, little guy..." Gordon amicably greeted, in his own modest fashion, as he gave the boy a small, friendly wave.

"H-helloâ€¦" Matty bashfully reciprocated, with his head still tentatively tucked between his shoulders.

Upon seeing the frightened countenance in those little eyes, any trace of ire or anger in Miranda simply melted away. She sighed. "I'm sorry, Shepard." She bestowed, with a shake of her head, as she turned to face him. "It's just... You have NO IDEA what we've been through tonight."

"Well, trust me. It isn't as though I knew this was going to happen, Mirandaâ€¦" John replied, with a nonchalant shrug. "And heyâ€¦ Couldn't be any worse than what we've been throughâ€¦" He put forth, with a laugh, as he waved a palm-up hand up and down, over his chest, drawing attention to his own injured, battered state.

"Uhmâ€¦ Excuse meâ€¦!" An unfamiliar woman's voice suddenly echoed out from within the hole in the ceiling. "But, can someone please get me down from hereâ€¦!"

"Hmphâ€¦" Miranda scoffed, under her breath, as she raised an eyebrow, crossed her arms, and gave Shepard a cocksure grin. "Wanna bet?"

"What...?" The Commander asked, perplexed, as he approached the hole

and looked up to see the soiled and bruised face of a fair skinned woman. "And who is this?"

"Oh come now, Shepard!" Miranda said in reply, as the occupants of the medbay gathered around the ceiling vent. "You remember our reporter friend, don't you? The one that crashed our little dinner engagement last night!"

"Oh, of course!" Tali sneered, disparagingly. "Little Miss 'ooh, you're so strong, Shepard!" She continued, speaking in a jeering, hoity-toity tone.

"Right, I remember you. 'The mole'" John replied with a balmy sarcasm and a mild chuckle, as he gazed up, with his arms crossed "Carolyn, wasn't it?"

"I-it was uhm, Cameron actually!" Replied the blonde haired lady, with the glaring red welt on her forehead. "Cameron McClane!"

"Oh, Cameron. I'm sorry."

"It's okay!" Came the meek reply from the hole.

"What is SHE doing here?" The Commander queried with a shrug, as he turned back to Miranda and Gordon.

Gordon's only reply was a coy shrug of his own.

"She was trying to squeeze an interview out of Gordon when these derelicts seized the ship!" Miranda explained. "When they did, she attached herself to us like a parasitic lamprey! Uh, no offense, of course!" She pardoned herself, as she glanced up into darkened cavity, and shook her head.

"...None taken." Cameron answered back, somewhat begrudgingly. "But uhm... I still need to get down from here!" She crossly exclaimed. "Could you perhaps help me down, Dr. Freeman?"

"Yeah, sure. Just-"

"You don't need Gordon's help!" An affronted Miranda interjected, abruptly cutting Gordon off. "Just bridge your body across the gap and gradually lower your legs down, nice and easy! It couldn't be simpler!"

"Uh! O-o-okay!" Cameron squeamishly acknowledged, as she hesitantly drew her arms across hole, and crossed the gap. "Here I go!" She declared, nervously. With the front of her frame across, she slowly lowered one leg down, out of the hole. It wriggled a bit, dangling in the air, as if searching for some sort of footing - but this high off the ground, she wasn't about to find any.

"Ahhh!" She shrieked, as her other foot suddenly slipped out, dragging her entire body out to the floor with it.

Cameron clenched her eyes shut, as she felt herself lose her grip on the edge of the ceiling vent. This was going to hurt! But! It didn't! Reluctantly, she began to crack one eye open. Much to her uncommunicated delight, what she saw was the scarred and somehow captivating face of the One Free Man, as she found herself cradled in

his arms.

"Careful, Miss!" Gordon insisted, with a general sense of concern - the same kind of concern any good samaritan would show for a stranger in need. "I told you, you have to take it slow, and mind your footing." He elaborated, as he set her down.

"Oh, heh!" Thank you." Cameron bestowed, modest and gracious, as she straightened herself out, and dusted herself off. "Wow!" She declared, impressed and demure, as she glanced at Gordon before glancing at the faces around the room - one of which was brooding with a silent scorn. "How many girls can say they were saved from a fall by Gordon Freeman?!"

"Yes, and now that you're down-" Miranda said, with a brazen sarcasm and a disdainful sneer. "-do you think you can last five minutes without TRIPPING ALL OVER YOURSELF?!"

"Hmph!" Shepard snickered a little under his breath, as he leaned closer to Tali. "This could get interesting!"

hr

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN YOU RETREATED?!" The cyclopean Commander Kim snarled into his radio, through his teeth, sputtering out saliva like a rabid dog. "Ten minutes ago you told me you had him cornered! What happened?!"

Kim paced back and forth, in a frenzied rage, listening to one of his peons tell the tale. Meanwhile, Kargas, the lime-green brow-plated krogan, simply sat at one of the inert consoles nearby, shaking his head and listening in, with his arms crossed and a look of disgust on his face.

"HOW MANY?!" The fog-eyed head of security bellowed out again. "What? You told me that you had spotted two people! And that you and the others had cornered them in a room on the Mezzanine Deck. Now all of a sudden, you're telling me you don't even know how many there actually were?! ...What?!" He paused to listen, as he continued to pace back and forth across the rear of the bridge. "GHOSTS?! It wasn't any ghosts you idiot! It's a hit-and-run tactic! Guerilla warfare! He played you morons like the saps you are!" Just then, he stopped pacing, as words continued to chatter away in his ear. "SCARED?! I don't give an FTL fuck how scared you were! I told you to! RRGH!" He grunted and snarled in an uncontrolled rage, clenching his teeth together to the point of shattering them, as he tore the communicator out of his ear, and clutched it tightly in one fist. His white-knuckled hand trembled, and his face turned a bright shade of red from the unbridled fury he was feeling.

"Hmhmhmhm!" He suddenly heard a condescending, throaty cackle coming from behind him. "I take it your army of elite, highly trained security specialists were calling in to report their success in apprehending Shepard?" Kargas added to his guffaw, as he reclined back in the seat, with an air of arrogance about him.

Kim turned back around, and glared a hole straight through the krogan, incensed. "...Not exactly." He mustered through his teeth.

"Puhâ€|!" Kargas scoffed dismissively, as he stood up, off the chair. "Of course they weren't! I told you your outfit of fools would be no match for man that stopped the Reapers. What did you think was going to happen?!" He demanded, with his arms outstretched, in a shrug. "Sending them after Shepard is like sending an army of pyjaks after an alpha varrenâ€| You fed them to him!"

"Well Davix and Tesh didn't do any better, Kargas!" Kim immediately blurted out, in angry retort. But as soon as he did, he exhaled a disconsolate, almost grief-stricken sigh. His eyes sank, and he bowed his head, as he leaned himself against the nearest console. "They stopped reporting in because they're deadâ€| Both of 'emâ€|" He said, looking up at Kargas, with a look and tone of genuine despair and defeat, as Tarrik approached the two, and listened intently.

"Shepardâ€| burned Davix alive, and then shot him." The cyclopean human continued, as a chill shuddered his body. "And Teshyaâ€|" He sighed, with grief. "The son of a bitch literally caved in her skullâ€|!"

An eerie tranquility hung in the room, as the three agitators remained silent for a moment, simply trying to process what was happening. The only sounds were the hum of the engines, and the hiss of Tarrik's respirator. That is until Kargas' throat reverberated with a throaty growl, like the sound of an ornery alligator.

"I had already presumed as muchâ€|" The vengeful krogan declared, as he pulled his sizeable shotgun off of the rear of his armor. "I'll deal with Shepard myself... As I should have from the beginning!"

"Look, that's not a good idea." Kim insisted, standing up, away from the console, as he addressed Kargas, who was already making for the door. "We've lost him again. He could be anywhere by now, and on top of that, we don't even know how many people he's got with him." He continued. "Some of my men reported seeing two or three, a few others said he was alone, and some said they were surrounded by 20 guys...!" He exclaimed, flustered. "I think the best thing we can do is to just batten down here until we reach the relay... Once we hand over the ship and collect payment from the four-eyes, Shepard'll be their problem. Let them deal with him."

"Yes, I agree with Commander Kim." Tarrik interjected, as he stepped forth, while Kargas snorted and sneered. "Hasty action on your part would be ill-advised. We know of at least Shepard, and this Freeman being loose."

The mere mention of the latter name coaxed an annoyed, cynical roll of Kim's eyes.

"This ship has become their hunting ground, Kargas." Tarrik continued. "Throwing yourself into that fray will only serve to get you killed."

"That's right, I forgot-" Kim supplemented, with an obvious timbre of sarcasm, as he stepped up beside Tarrik to address the krogan. "-Shepard didn't come alone. He brought his whole gang, right?" He beckoned, as he looked down at the volus, with a disparaging shrug. "Let's see, there's uh Gordon Freemanâ€|" He announced, as he began

to count names off on his fingers. "Abe Lincoln, Sherlock Holmes, and SANTA CLAUS!"

"I don't fear death and I don't fear Shepard!" The krogan roared, as he spun himself around to face the two naysayers. "Nor do I fear any man with him! Should death choose me, it will choose me embattled with the human Shepard! And though I die, I will drag him down into the accursed ether with me!" He proudly proclaimed, as he turned back around and marched towards the door. "That much I swear!"

"Listen!" Kargas heard the Commanders booming voice shout in his ear, as he felt a strong hand clutch his shoulder pad, and spin him back around.

"I ain't afraid of Shepard, but I'm not stupid enough to play right into his hands!" The one-eyed officer declared, as the two stood face to face, with a growing look of ire overtaking the both of them. "You've gotta stop thinking with your quad for a moment, and listen! The volus is right! It'd be suicide going after Shepard alone. Don't be an idiot!"

"YOU'RE calling ME an idiot?!" The krogan demanded, pointing a rigid finger into Kim's chest, before pointing it back at himself.

"Yeah, I'm calling you an idiot!"

"You are coming dangerously close to having your SPINE ripped out, human!" Kargas snarled, as he took a step closer, waving the same stiff finger in the Commander's face.

"You know something Karg..." Kim reciprocated, stepping vis a vis, chest to chest with the brawny krogan without the slightest hint of intimidation. "You're a lot of talk... And I'm starting to think that's all you are, is talk! If you got something you wanna prove so bad-"

Suddenly, with a surge of uncanny, near superhuman quickness, Kim's impressive silvery handgun - which was holstered on his hip one second - was in his hands with the barrel dug into the krogan's fleshy throat, the next.

"-Why don't you prove it to me?!"

This confrontation was poised for an abrupt and bloody end, as Kargas quickly answered back by burying the barrel of his own shotgun between the officer's broad, muscular pectorals. The two stood there, weapons in hand, silently damning each other with their eyes, as their fingers slowly tightened around their own respective triggers.

"Wait! Stop...!" A shrill, nasally voice pleaded, with the accompanying hiss of a respirator. "Gentlemen, calm down! Let's not be foolhardy...!"

His words fell on deaf ears however, as both men seemed determined to destroy each other.

"Listen to me, please!" He implored again, as he stepped closer to the two. "Kargas, your mercenaries and mechs didn't work. And neither did your security team, Commander." He admitted, addressing one and

then the other. "We tried both of your ways. Now we try mineâ€¦"

"Oh, this outta be goodâ€¦" Kim snickered, though never once taking his eyes nor his weapon off of the krogan. "Pleaseâ€¦ Enlighten us."

"Well, think about itâ€¦" Tarrik began to elaborate. "it doesn't matter how many members of Shepard's crew may yet be on the loose. It's obvious that he and this Gordon Freeman are the crux inciters. If we can gain dominion over those two, the rest will easily fall into line... And I can guarantee you that both Shepard AND Freeman will come to us, and surrender themselves willinglyâ€¦"

The last remark definitely peaked interest, and incited curiosity as both men seemed to concurrently turn their pupils down at the volus.

"And just why would they do that?" Kargas demanded, intrigued.

"Because my good, ill-tempered kroganâ€¦" Tarrik arrogantly followed up. "They'd have to be the absolute soulless, bloodthirsty, sadistic killers I thought you two to be when I hired you, if they don't."

Kargas and Kim shared another uneasy glance. They still stood with their weapons brandished at each other, but the grip around their triggers had loosened considerably. As if communing with their eyes alone, they glanced down at their own weapons and shared a subtle nod. As if trying to avoid the sting from a venomous snake, they each withdrew their weapons very slowly, and very carefully. When they both had their armaments a good distance away, they exhaled a withheld sigh, and lowered their weapons completely, before turning to look down at the volus.

"Alright... What do you have in mind?" Kim queried.

"Wellâ€¦!" Tarrik began, with a newfound cheerfulness. "Now that we're all one the same page again. Commander Kim-" He said, as he pointed at the uniformed head of security. "-I want you to go out and wait for Shepard's imminent surrender, which, as I assured you, will come. In the meantime, Kargas and I will go-"

"I'LL go and wait for Shepard's surrender!" The bellowing krogan imposed, as wrenched his grip around his shotgun, and held it up.

"No!" Tarrik immediately refuted, holding two deterring hands up at the krogan. "I don't want you doing anything rash just yet." He explained, pleadingly. "And for this to work, I have need of your - intimidating dispositionâ€¦ Please, just trust meâ€¦ This WILL work!"

The krogan's throat reverberated with a coarse, throaty growl, as he snarled down at the volus, before reluctantly accepting. "Very wellâ€¦" He conceded, as he lowered his weapon. "But you better deliver Shepard!"

"I will!" Tarrik gratefully assured, with palpable relief. "Leahr, my

lad-" He then called out, as he turned towards the fore of the bridge, where a languished, despondent quarian sat with his head hanging down over the console - an empty shell of a man. "-would you be so kind as to reactivate the ship's elevators. I don't have a particular... fondness of stairs. What with myâ€| stunted physique and all."

Not taking the trouble to respond to his malefactor's request, a dreary-eyed Leahr'Haan simply raised one hand, and draped it over the holographic keyboard in front of him. His fingers went to work, lethargically punching keys into the terminal with one hand, while his metal-plated chin rested upon the palm of the other.

"I'll send for some extra security to keep an eye on the suit rat." Commander Kim said, as he holstered his gun. "But if I'm the one that's going out to wait for Shepard, I have a few things i need to grab from my quarters first." He candidly imparted with an obstinate sneer. "I don't know what the hell you've got in mind, but this plan of yours better work, volus." The scarred, one-eyed head of security delegated, as he directed an austere finger at Tarrik before turning and making for the door.

"Yes it hadâ€|" The stubby little ringleader heard Kargas concur, as he could almost feel the warm hiss off his breath on the back of his neck, through his suit. The conniving little agitator looked on as Commander Kim walked towards the rear of the room. His devious little eyes watchingâ€| waiting for him to reach the door. And no sooner had the malevolent officer activated the holopanel, and stepped through the entryway, whenâ€|

"Oh, uhâ€| One moment, Commander!" Tarrik abruptly shouted out, as he shuffled towards the doorway as fast as he could, practically running. "There's something I forgot to mention before you go!"

Kim stopped and turned around, preparing to step back into the room. But before he could do so, Tarrik had already rushed out and joined him in the adjacent hallway outside. He was surprisingly quick on his feet for someone of his stature and girth.

"What is it, Tarrik?" Kim demanded, placing his hands on his hips, and looking down as the thick, metal door to the bridge automatically slid shut behind them.

"There's something I wanted to bring to your attentionâ€|" The stubby volus began, practically whispering, with one hand cupped around his flashing mouthpiece, forcing the Commander to move in closer just so he could hear him. "What would you say if I told you I could get a hundred million credits for Shepard alone? So long as he's aliveâ€|"

"A hundred million credits?!" Kim replied, recoiling in shock and dubiety. "Who the hell would pay that kind of money for one manâ€|?"

"Commander Shepard has no shortage of enemiesâ€|" Tarrik happily elaborated. "His head has become a highly valued commodity across the Terminus. For instance... A few months ago he was involved in the destruction of a privately owned prison station, called Purgatory. And it just so happens that I have it on very good authority that some of the parties involved, with that station, have placed a very

exorbitant price on his head. A hundred million credits, to be precise..."

"Whewâ€¦" Kim involuntarily let out a sharp whistle. "I don't knowâ€¦" He said, reluctantly shaking his head. "Shepard might be too dangerous to be kept alive. On the other handâ€¦" He continued, as a greedy, gleamy-eyed smirk grew on his face. "A hundred million credits sure does make it worth the riskâ€¦"

"Exactlyâ€¦!" Tarrik zealously concurred, as he wrung his gloved hands together. "There's only one problem." He stated, as he motioned towards the sealed door, with his head. "Our good friend Kargas is never going to allow us to do it, what with his vendetta and allâ€¦ And I'm afraid the bounty on Shepard's head stipulates that he is to be delivered alive. It didn't say unscathedâ€¦ But aliveâ€¦ I was hoping, when the time comes, you could deal with our krogan associate decisively, in the best way you see fitâ€¦"

"In other wordsâ€¦ kill him...?"

"As I said, in the best way you see fit." Tarrik reiterated, shrugging and raising his hands up beside his head as if to absolve himself of sin.

"Hmmâ€¦" Kim hummed pensively, as he stared intently at the solid metal door, as if being able to peer right through it. "Alright, look." He began again, as he looked back down. "You just worry about getting Shepard to come to us. I'll deal with Kargas."

"Of course!" Tarrik assured - his arms outstretched with the veneer of camaraderie "I knew YOU'D be reasonable about thisâ€¦"

The solid, silvery door to the bridge slid open, as the lone volus waddled back in, from the outside.

"What took you so long?! Are we set to go?!" Kargas interrogated with a litany of questions as soon as Tarrik walked back in. "What's this plan of yours?! What are we doing?!"

"Patience my rotund friendâ€¦" The volus insisted, waving his hands down in front of him, in an effort to quell the restless predator. "We first need to go retrieve one of the bridge crew members locked in the storage room down the hall. But, before I delve into detail, there's something I wanted to speak to you aboutâ€¦"

"Something like what?"

"Commander Kimâ€¦" Tarrik answered back, sighing with a deeply somber tone. "He worries me... I'm not sure he can be trusted. I think he intends to turn on us."

"Pfftâ€¦" Kargas snickered and laughed all at once. "It isn't, as though, I EVER trusted that human! But what makes you so sure he's going to betray us, outright?"

"I fear his greed may be insatiable." Tarrik added, beneath the constant hiss of his respirator. "I understand he has his own selfish plans in store for Shepardâ€¦ He'll never let you have him." He said, looking up into the krogan's eyes while slowly shaking his head. "He's going to deny your glory, my friendâ€¦ When the time comes, you

know what you'll have to doâ€|"

"So I doâ€|" The last Weyrloc acceded, as he turned to glare angrily at the whizzing stars outside the forward windows. "No one is going to stand between me and my vengeanceâ€|"

32. Chapter 32: Helpless

****Salvation: Episode I - The Taking of the Carmenta
Illustria****

Disclaimer: This fan-fiction is part of an episodic series taking place after Salvation: A Half-Life/Mass Effect Universe Fan Fiction, which will lead directly to its sequel, Salvation II: Project Prometheus. These episodes and sequel take place OUTSIDE of the Mass Effect 3 continuity. Characters property of their respective companies, Half-Life created by Valve and Mass Effect created by Bioware.

****Chapter 32: Helpless****

Glowing flames still flickered brightly - burning atop towering columns, etched with tribal, alien markings, and blazing in the center of metallic braziers, arranged throughout the cavernous room. Their glowing flame were perhaps the only remnant left of this room's once lively, jovial atmosphere. A malleable sensation that had been pounded away into to an air of despondency.

A sense of angst still loomed in the crowded room, among the fearful passengers. Obviously, the dread of things to come had not abated. But they seemed a bit more placid nowâ€| Most of the passengers had accepted the situation as some sort of surreal nightmare that they'd soon awaken from. Many chit-chatted with each other, sharing their stories.

"This was our 300th anniversary" one asari said.

"I had been saving up for this for five yearsâ€|" Another fellow, with a blue collar, pedestrian demeanor about him replied. "I was so looking forward to thisâ€|"

They did their best to assuage their own nerves, and find comfort in each other. And the sense of panic was still indisputable - however, it may not have been the hostages that were feeling it the most...

In the midst of it all, a pair of narrowed, chromatic eyes panned across the broad room, vigilantly darting back and forth, like a security camera scanning for anomalies. The blended murmur of a thousand different voices behind him was completely drowned out by the processes of his own mind, and the inferences it was drawing.

"Any of you notice that the number of guards in this room has dwindled by about halfâ€|?" The keen-eyed turian finally asked aloud, as his pupils continued to focus on the agitated, almost frenzied demeanor of the guards on security detail around the packed Promenade Deck.

"Maximum number of security personnel recorded within this deck was sixty-four, at twenty-one hundred hours, twenty-two minutes - exactly one hour, and seven minutes after initial hostility." Legion concisely offered up, breaking his silence for the first time in nearly an hour. "Current security personnel presence calculated at twenty-seven. A 42.1875% decrease."

"Sixty-four down to twenty-seven, huh?" Garrus said, in accord. "Yeah, I knew it. And the ones that are left are actin' pretty darn antsy..."

"Hmphâ€|" Grunt let out a throaty scoff, as he sat nearby, with his hands cuffed behind his back, along with the rest of his squadmates. "I'd say terrified is a better word."

"Yes. Things clearly not going as planned." Mordin offered up. "Remaining personnel obviously distressed. Panicked. Distractedâ€| May prove fortuitous in mounting counter-offensive."

"They've all got their hands pretty much glued to their radios." Zee, the young, outcasted turian officer, who sat along with them observantly added. "They're not even paying attention to us anymore. What do you think's going on?" He queried, naturally turning to Garrus for an answer.

"Shepard and Freeman, more than likelyâ€|" Jacob immediately interjected, answering the question before Garrus could even crack open his mouth. "I'm sure they're out there stirring up their own vintage brand of trouble, by now."

"Who's Freemanâ€|?" Zee asked, with a perplexed eyebrow raised.

"An egghead." Garrus replied, with a chortle.

"Huh?"

The vacationing turian chuckled, as he shook his head, before proceeding to explain. "He's another member of the crewâ€|" He said. "One of those brainy, human, scientist types. Like Mordin, over there." He blithely declared, as he leaned forward to glance over at their fellow salarian prisoner. "Except for the human part, of courseâ€|"

Unamused, Mordin simply neglected the comment with a subtle roll of his eyes.

"You know-" An entrancing feminine voice suddenly cut in. "I've seen a lot about the famous Normandy Crew reported in the news vids. But I've never heard any mention of any 'Freeman' before."

The voice belonged to none other than Vanessa Masters; the sultry, voluptuous, and somewhat mysterious business magnate, with silky, raven black hair, and deep captivating eyes, the color of Syringa Lilacs.

"Well, he's newâ€|" Garrus replied with a casual, nonchalant shrug.

"Hehâ€|" A mild titter from Jacob quickly caught Vanessa's attention. "Trust me, you've heard of him." He assured, giving her a confident

nod. "Maybe not in the news, recently. But in books, documentaries... high school history classâ€¦"

"What are you talking aboutâ€¦?" She questioned, befuddled.

"You ever seen that movie - 'Liberation: The Gordon Freeman Story'?"

"Of courseâ€¦! What human hasn't?" Vanessa adamantly put forth. "The original's a classic! I didn't much care for the remake though. Why do you ask?"

As she asked her question, and glanced over at Jacob, the only response she got from him was a slow, cocky nod, accompanied by a crooked, arrogant smirk.

"Do you mean to say that you've got an actual descendant of THEE Gordon Freeman on your team?!" Vanessa beckoned, stunned. "I had heard that he didn't have any living descendants...!"

"Well, not exactly." Jacob negated, holding in a laugh, as he shook his head.

"Then whatâ€¦?" The girl with the amethyst eyes beckoned again, clearly growing bored of the guessing game. "I don't understandâ€¦!"

"He means that we have the actual Egghead Freeman himself." Garrus chimed in, with clear sincerity. "You know, the guy who fought off the bovine or whatever it was that invaded your home planet a thousand years ago."

"It was the COMBINE, Vakarian, you history dunce! Earth wasn't invaded by an army of space cowsâ€¦!" Jacob laughingly corrected with a mix of assertion and jest. "And it was about two hundred years ago. Not a thousandâ€¦!"

"Whatever. She gets who I'm talking about, right?" The misinformed turian asked, as he looked over at Vanessa.

"What I get is that Galactic History probably wasn't your strongest subject in school, eh Mr. Vakarian?" The bewitching female replied, with a bit of a cynical titter under her breath, before turning her attention back to Jacob.

"But anyway, if I'm understanding correctly-" She began, skeptically laying out her words, as if she had already elected not to believe whatever she may be told. "-you're telling me that Gordon Freemanâ€¦! THEE Gordon Freemanâ€¦! Crowbar waving, Black Mesa surviving, resistance leading, Vortigaunt befriending Gordon Freeman is, in fact, alive and well, and a member of your teamâ€¦!?"

Jacob didn't really reply verbally. As a matter of fact, when he heard the way she put it, he had a bit of trouble believing it himself. But knowing it to be true, the only thing he did in response was give Vanessa a bit of a dubious smile, raise his eyebrows, and nod his head, as testimony.

"But howâ€¦!?" Vanessa beseeched, in shock. "The Earth Rebellion took place, as you said, nearly two hundred years agoâ€¦!" When she said

it, her own mind seemed to shift gears. Her focus left Jacob. She turned and stared blankly at the floor, as she seemed to seclude herself into a pensive state of thought. "Even if he had survived The Battle of Calvary Road, there's no way he could've lived this long." She mumbled her thoughts aloud. "Not without some sort of bio-neurological reconstruction, and an infusion of a syntho-organic molecular skin weave like m-" Her one-woman soliloquy stopped mid 'mmm' as she looked up, and realized that she had garnered the attention of Garrus, Jacob, and Zee - who sat looking at her with a befuddled, but intrigued look in their eyes. "-Likeâ€¦| Like the one I heard Commander Shepard hadâ€¦|" She quickly corrected herself, and proceeded. "Didn't uh - didn't he have something like that doneâ€¦|? Isn't that how they fixed him up? Is that what they did to Gordon Freeman to bring him back? Eheheheâ€¦|." She finished with an uneasy laugh, that failed to mask a nervous tone.

Jacob glanced at her, with a mild suspicion, making a mental note to himself to inquire later about what, it seemed, she almost let slip out.

"...No, he was never really killed." The former Cerberus Operative began again, pretending to shrug off his suspicions. "Despite what history says, ol' Gordon didn't actually die in his last battle against the Combine. He was secretly taken and put into a sort of stasis. Kept him preserved all this time. That's why they never found his body."

"Amazingâ€¦|!" Vanessa exclaimed with an eager, bright-eyed bleat. "Are you- are you being serious, or is this some sort of elaborate jokeâ€¦|?" She asked, trying hard to mask and contain her enthusiasm. "Because I must say, if there's one person from the annals of history I'd like to meet, it'd be Mr. One Free Manâ€¦|" She proclaimed, taking on a sultry, covetous tone - her thoughts noticeably wandering a little, as a moderately desirous grin grew on her face. "I kinda had a schoolgirl thing for the brainy specs look, back in the day."

"...I see." Jacob quickly retorted, with a pouty timbre, and a grimace of wounded pride, as he seemed to turn his head up and look away.

"Oh, come now, Mr. Taylorâ€¦|" He heard Vanessa say, as he felt a soft hand drape over his left thigh, and gently rub. "I may want to meet the man, but he's not the one who gave me his coat to save my decency-" She explained, with her natural tone fading to the luscious cadence of a seductive siren. "-and earned my _undying _gratitude and interest."

As Jacob glanced back over to her, she shot a suggestive wink in his direction, which in turn pleasingly chilled his body with an electric jolt. "Um, hehâ€¦|" Jacob huffed a laugh, and reciprocated a bashful, speechless smile. Here he wasâ€¦| Usually so calm and cool but this lady - this mystifying and enigmatic temptress - was making him stumble at every end. And he loved every minute of it.

"Well, It's what I do, Ms. Mastersâ€¦|" He quickly rebounded, with a debonair charm. "You're under the protection of Jacob Taylor nowâ€¦| Besides, what kinda man would I be if I allowed a lovely young thing like yourself to suffer any further indignities."

Vanessa grinned, somewhat nervously, as she recoiled a bit. "_...Not as young as you might think."_ She silently thought to herself.

"Yecch!" The tender moment was quickly interrupted by the immature sound of the young turian Zee, gagging as if he was about to wretch. "Any of this making you wanna hurl?" He turned, and said to Garrus, jokingly.

Vanessa whipped her head around. "Watch it, gomer!" She snarled irately, as she waved a tightly clenched fist in the turian's direction. "My vacation's been ruined, my necklace is gone, I've got dry shampoo crusted into my hair, and I'm sitting here in nothing but a towel and a sports coat... I've got one good thing going on this cruise! And if you ruin that, I'll pull out your mandibles, glue 'em to your head, and call you a salarian, savvy?!"

The young officer's expression said it all. Eyes drawn wide and mouth hanging open in stunned silence.

"Hehe, wow!" Garrus quickly chuckled, approvingly. "You know, I think Shepard'd probably like her, don't you guys?" He asked, as he looked back and forth, first towards Jacob, and Vanessa on his left, then towards Grunt, Mordin, and Legion on his right. "She'd fit right in on the Normandy, along with Jack andâ€¦ Uhmâ€¦" He paused for a moment, as he thought. "Well, she'd fit in with Jack anywayâ€¦"

"Heh, well I like her!" Grunt was quick to admit, as he grinned and laughed. "She talks about dismembering the smaller turian. It's funny!"

Vanessa's face beamed with glee, at the atmosphere of acceptance she'd seemingly been granted.

"Hey, that's nothingâ€¦!" She quickly began again, her words mired with enthusiasm, as she scooted a little closer to the whole of the group. "You boys wanna hear how I once turned a Turian into a Turina with nothing but a letter opener and a stack of towels?"

"Lady, it was a jokeâ€¦!" The appalled, suddenly grim-faced Zee began again, disparagingly shaking his head, as he crossed his legs tightly, on impulse. "Seek help!"

* * *

><p>A door to a ghostly room slid open, and a shadowy figure with a darkened soul stood at the entryway. A thin strip of light splashed across his face, accentuating his eyes. One was a swirling vortex of black pitch. The other was nothing but a scarred, vacated orb of white sclera. The cold eyes were narrowed with a purpose, as he took a step into the room. Upon entering, as if the room itself was able to sense his very presence, the lights lining the ceiling flared up. But even with the lights on, the room was bathed in a dimly lit glow. It was as if this place, this lair, liked the feel of the cold and the dark.<p>

The metal floors, walls, and ceiling were all bland, and sallow. It was the type of room one might find on a submarine - or perhaps on the lower levels of a certain famous Alliance Frigate. A few metal

lockers lined the left wall. And against the right, was a narrow bed, almost a cot, with a pillow, and a single, thin sheet, sloppily discarded on top of it. Near the far back wall was a rather large desk, with a silvery name plate resting on it, that read: Security Cmdr. Andrew Kim.

Behind the desk, was a large glass case, nestled into the wall - the type of case where one might exhibit trophies and awards. Or in the case of one Commander John Shepard, where one might keep a prized model ship collection.

Housed within THIS display however, were no trophies or model ships. There weren't any plaques or metals, or laurels and accolades. Instead, sitting under the beam of a lonely light, was a hearty, impenetrable looking chest plate. It was dark blue in color, accented with golden stripes, much like the uniform he wore. On its left chest, a golden badge stamped right into the armor read: Carmenta Illustria Security Officer. The metallic armor shimmered in the light, and the golden badge radiated like a star. It looked new, and unscathed - a virgin to battle. But it also looked puissant and impervious - a mighty escutcheon that would surely see baptism by fire this night.

Directly in front of the breastplate, was a long, silvery shotgun, suspended on a rack, with three thermal clip cylinders resting beneath it. Unlike the armor plate, this weapon - a highly customized and upgraded version of the Armax Avalanche - seemed to be no stranger to conflict. Its shaft was marred with dings and scratches. A nylon strap, hanging from the butt and the barrel, was ragged and worn. And an Armax Arsenal logo etched on its side, formerly bright red in color, was nearly faded entirely, leaving only a dull silverish mark, with a tiny glimmer of red.

Commander Andrew Kim stood there for a moment, appraising his arsenal. He reached up, touched his left brow with his fingertips, and ran his fingers down to his cheek - tracing the deep scar that marked his face, as he thought back to the last time he saw combat. A seething sneer crept in on his face as he stared at his reflection in the glass; looking upon his disfigurement, and the loss of his eye. Hesitating no longer, he reached out and pressed a small, holographic button next to the display case, causing the glass pane to slide open.

Kim yanked the hefty armor plating out of the display shelf, knocking the stand that held it up out onto the floor. He opened it up and drew it over his head, like a sandwich sign. With it drawn over his chest and back, he adjust twin magnetic clasps on both sides of his hips, thus fastening it securely to his abdomen. Two tiny blue diodic lights lit up on his chest, and a low hum resonated from within it, as an indigo shimmer washed over his body. As the armor was activated it automatically synced up with his omni-tool, causing it to light up on its own, around his forearm, to display a number of associated readouts.

[ELANUS RISK CONTROL - PROTECTORATE VII: LAW ENFORCEMENT/URBAN PACIFICATION ARMOR ENGAGED]

[PLATE INTEGRITY: 100%]

[KINETIC BARRIERS: 100%]

[TECH ARMOR: FULLY CHARGED - ENGAGE WHEN READY]

Commander Kim nodded and exhibited a satisfied grin, as he put his omni-tool away. It wasn't a full set of standard military combat armor - just a chest piece. But with the immense amount of built-in auxiliary shielding, it would more than suffice. With his armor and badge gleaming in the light beams, he took up the weathered weapon, as well one of the thermal clips. He opened an empty compartment near the stock of the shotgun, and quickly inserted the cylinder into place, before sealing the compartment back up. The firearm whirred, as if awakening from a lengthy sleep with an urge to kill. As the red indicator light on it's side showed him that it was ready for combat, in all respects, he grabbed the remaining two thermal clips, one by one, and slid them into two empty compartments on the backside of his belt. With his defenses raised, he held up the shotgun, cradling it in his hands idly across his chest. He turned back around, and made his way towards the door as the room subsided back into darkness behind him.

* * *

><p>"E-excuse me, please. Sorry, can I get through here?" A light complected blonde, in a short, tight fitting red skirt beseeched, as she crawled, on all fours, through the jumbled hodgepodge of hostages thronging the Promenade Deck floor. "Ooh, watch your hair."<p>

"Ow, my hand!" A lady turian griped, as she yanked her fingers out from under the curvaceous woman's knee. "What are you doing?! Watch it!"

"I'm sorry, I'm justâ€¦ Oh, nevermind!" She scoffed, indifferently disregarding the turian, as she continued to force and squeeze her way through the sea of organics. A bit further up, she could make out the outline of a slim man, with a silvery neckbrace around his collar, and a black and white cap resting snugly upon his head.

"Oof!" She grunted a little, as she bumped, head first, into the corpulent posteriors of two elcor, seated upon the floor, like a reposed dog or cat.

"Courteously: My apologies young lady." One of the humdrum beings offered, as he turned his head around a bit, to face her. "Concerned inquiry: Can I help you?"

"Oh, no thank you. I'm just tryin-na UMPHâ€¦!! Just wanna get through here, hnggh!" She grunted and strained, as she persistently tried to squeeze her way between them. A fruitless undertaking. It was like trying to push past a pair of bull elephants.

"Reassuringly: Do not fret my dear." The same elcor replied. "This situation is frightening. But we must keep our heads, and hope for the best."

"Dejected rebuttal: How can you say that?" The second being questioned in a tone that was dreary, even for an elcor. "It is clear we are doomed."

"With optimism: We mustn't give up just yet." The first one answered

back, as the young Miss persistently tried to squeeze her way between them, going largely unnoticed by the two. "We have to remain hopeful that they will let us go, as they have said."

"Uh, listen. I'm sorry to interrupt you two." The fair haired lady candidly proclaimed, as she stopped to address the two bickering behemoths for a moment. "But, you see that man up there?" She asked, as she hoisted herself up, and drew her arm over their shoulders to point the capped human figure out. "I'm just trying to get to him. I really need to talk to him. Do you think there's anyway you can scooch over just a tad and let me through?"

"Cynically: It is a blatant lie." The two elcor continued on with their conversation, completely heedless to the human girl and her troubles. "They are going to kill us. I can feel it."

"Embittered response: You've always been such a naysayer."

"Oh, forget it!" She griped, as she crawled away on all fours, trying to find a path around them, rather than through them.

Joker sat, slouched down, dead center in the huddled sea of lifeforms, with his legs cross indian-style, and his chin resting drearily on his palms - exhibiting the full visage of a pouty child.

"Urrrrrghh!" He whined, as he drew his arms behind his back, and reclined onto them, while simultaneously stretching his legs out - trying to find a comfortable position for his stiff and aching body. "Why did I even come on this stupid cruise?!" He grumbled to himself. "Should'a stayed back on the Normandy with EDI!"

In the midsts of his bellyaching, he didn't quite notice the red skirt clambering her way over and through several of the other passengers, to his right, to get to him.

"Ow! My hair!" Came a shriek. "Watch where you're going!"

"Yeah, sure honey. Like that's even your real hair!" The fair-skinned wayfarer snapped back, as she finally reached her objective.

"Uhm! Hi!" She enthusiastically greeted, as she plopped herself down in front of him, squeezing her back against that of an asari to forcibly fit. "Remember me?"

Joker looked up, and gave the woman an indifferent look from top to bottom. He shrugged casually as he he shook his head. "Should I?"

"Yeah, it's me Lexi!" She cheerfully enthused. "Remember from earlier yesterday? Me, you, and a couple other girls were lounging by the pool. You bought us drinks, and you were telling us about how you stopped the Reapers. Remember?"

"Oh yeah!" He said apathetically. "Now I remember."

Lexi beamed a nervous smile. "So uh!" She tentatively continued, shrugging and raising her eyebrows at Joker expectantly. "Don't you think you should, uhm-?"

Joker furrowed his brow at this woman who was obviously pressing for him to fill in the blank. "...What?"

"Well, you know!" She declared. "You stopped the Reapers, right? Isn't it about time you - I dunno - did something...? Like say; save us?"

Joker rolled his eyes and shook his head, as he re-cradled his chin into his palms, and slouched back down, with the guise of a pouty child.

"Lady, I'm on vacation!" He crossly muttered. "Didn't I do enough by buying you a drink?!"

As the woman in the red skirt grew noticeably irate and proceeded to verbally bash an apathetic Joker, a silver haired, human female Doctor provided comfort and counsel to a distraught couple, a short distance away. The couple sat huddled closely, with a look of restless angst in their eyes, and their hands clasped tightly in each other's grip. The wife exhibited a prominent red welt upon the left side of her face. And a severe wound on the back of the husband's head was masked with a well-placed white bandage. Despite his injuries, he was fully conscious now, and the only pain he could feel - the only pain either of them felt - was the tortuous suspense of not knowing what was happening with their lost little boy.

Beyond them, back up at the front of the crowded agglomeration, the tedium, anxiety, and call for action was starting to mount for the Normandy team.

"Damn it, I can't stand this anymore!" Jacob doggedly griped - rotating his neck and shoulders, and shuffling around on his rear in an attempt to find a position of comfort. His face was shiny with sweat, and tiny rivulets ran down his cheeks and neck, creating a ring of moisture around his collar. "My arms are killing me! And did they shut off the damned air conditioner, or something? I swear the temperature in here's gone up 30 degrees since they first brought us in!"

"Current temperature is 307.983 degrees Kelvin. Or 94.7 degrees Fahrenheit." Legion concisely disclosed. "An increase of approximately 26.5 degrees, from the average temperature of 68.2. The ship's air conditioning circulation systems are operating at a capacity of only 32% for reasons unknown."

"It could be a demoralization tactic. Something to make everyone more submissive." Garrus conjectured with a groan, as he torqued his own, stiff neck around a bit. "Back at C-Sec, during an interrogation, we'd sometimes leave a suspect sitting in a room for hours, with the temperature gradually increasing. By the time we'd go to interrogate them, they were stripped down, dripping with sweat, and willing to tell us anything we wanted to know just to get the hell outta there, heh." He said with a chuckle. "You'd be surprised how many low-lives would give each other up for a cool drink of water."

"Yeah well, either that or Freeman broke the air conditioner." Jacob replied, rotating his tense neck about, and trying to stretch out as best he could. "He's famous, for that you know!"

"Whatever the case, I'm not giving up THIS cool drink of water."

Vanessa chimed in, as she slid over, behind Jacob.

"Ooooh! Oh god, thank you!" Jacob blithely declared, slowly slipping into a state of euphoria, as Vanessa sensually began massaging his shoulders. "Oh, that feels amazing!"

"...Lucky varren." Garrus muttered enviously, under his breath.

"Well, you know I'D be more than happy to massage your shoulders, Mr. Vakarian, sir!" Young Zee happily enthused. "But uh..." He jingled the chains binding his wrists together, behind his back. "I'm kinda handcuffed too."

"No, that's... That's okay, kid." Garrus awkwardly absolved. "That's not, uh... Yeah."

"Guys listen." Jacob imposed, while still on the receiving end of a relaxing rub down. "Too much time has passed. Way too much time. We haven't heard a damn thing from Shepard, Freeman, Tali OR Miranda. I don't wanna think it, but for all we know, they've already been captured, or worse..."

"Yes." Mordin hesitantly acknowledged. "Considered same possibility, as well."

"But if we do anything, they'll just take out more hostages." Garrus dubiously added, with a dismal shake of his head. "That's why we surrendered ourselves in the first place. Nothing's changed."

"All I know is the clock's ticking. We gotta make a move and make it now." Jacob asserted. Thinking on the same wavelength, they all seemed to scooch closer together, into a huddle; A congress comprised of Legion, Grunt, Mordin, Garrus, Jacob, and even Zee and Vanessa.

"Legion, I know some some geth units have cloaking systems built in." Jacob began again, as a plan began to formulate. "You equipped with anything like that, by any chance?"

"Negative." Legion refuted. "This mobile platform is designated a Geth Infiltrator. The tactical cloaking array you delineate is inherent within Geth Hunters, not Infiltrators."

"It doesn't matter anyway." Garrus rebutted, with a shake of his head. "They'd be quick to notice a missing geth. But a salarian on the other hand..." He conjectured, as he turned to the team's science officer. "Mordin, you're former STG. Do you think you can slip outta here unnoticed, find out where the other hostages are being held, and secure 'em?"

"Plausible." Mordin earnestly affirmed. "Escaping and finding something to pick cuffs won't be problematic. Problem will come when I'm discovered missing."

"Well they're not paying much attention to us right now. But you'll have to move fast." Jacob austerely affirmed. "They'll be keeping the other hostages close. The last time we saw them, they were on the bridge. So they're probably being held somewhere in that vicinity."

"The bridge is two decks up!" Zee eagerly chimed in. "I saw it when they gave me the quick tour, before we left port. There's a storage room right down the hall from there. It's big, and it's got a sturdy locking door. I'd say that'd be a good place to start."

Jacob, Mordin, Garrus, and Grunt all shared a brief glance, followed up by a slow, acknowledging nod of their heads.

"Alright, Ms. Masters." Jacob said, as he turned to the woman seated to his left. "If and when the shooting starts, you just stay behind me and keep your head down."

"Darling, when the shooting starts, you just see if you can keep up with ME!" Vanessa retorted with a snicker.

Jacob pursed his lips to respond, but before a single utterance could escape, he felt Vanessa soft-skinned finger press tightly against it.

"It may surprise you to know that I'm no stranger to dealing with hostile takeovers." She began again, with an air of pride and confidence. "Or firearms for that matter. And the way I see itâ€¦ the five of you are gonna need all the help you can get."

"Six!" Zee abruptly interjected, coaxing the Normandy team to glance over at him. "There's six of us... I told you, I'm with you guys. We save these people, or die tryingâ€¦"

"I got better things to do tonight, than die!" Grunt snarled.

Garrus inhaled deeply, and exhaled a flustered sigh, with a slow, subtle shake of his head. 'Alrightâ€¦' He reluctantly accepted. "Let's run down a plan."

"No!" A blood-curdling scream suddenly rang out from within the hall that led to the Promenade Deck's main entrance, and elevators. "Let me go!"

As the crying shrieks echoed throughout the room, the Normandy team looked up to see three figures, of vastly contrasting proportions, enter the room. The first was an imperious imp of a volus, with a pristine white Captain's naval cap sitting atop his undeserving brow. Behind him, a young, human brunette, wearing a dark blue Carmenta Illustria Crew uniform, struggled to break free from the cemented grip around her arm. A grip belonging to her captor; a herculean krogan with a lime-green brow plate, donned in a jaded set of burgundy armor, marked with twin white skulls upon each shoulder.

"Get your hands off of me. Let me go!" The frantic brunette pleaded - continually trying to tear herself away from the burly mercenary, as she was dragged into the room.

"Enough!" Kargas snarled without pity or remorse, as he stopped, raised the handgun in his grip, and aimed it at the brunette's face. "Be silent or be silenced!" He demanded, forcing the rebellious young woman to show restraint for fear of a bullet.

"What fresh hell is this?" Vanessa muttered aloud, as she, Zee, and

the rest of the Normandy crew sat watching the maleficent duo walk right up to them, with their fearful captive in tow.

"So THESE are Shepard's underlings!" Kargas bellowed, with an odious grin, as he stepped up to the front row of hostages on the floor, towering over them like a lighthouse presiding over the sea. "Every bit as worthy of the krogan blood on Shepard's hands as he is!"

Mordin clenched his lips and took a deep breath, as an amalgam of rue and resolve washed over his expression.

"Uhâ€¦" Jacob stuttered in reply, furrowing a befuddled brow. "I-I'm sorry. What?"

"Shut up!" Kargas roared, in a rage. "Each of you is going to die just as painfully as he will!"

"Wellâ€¦ Won't that be fun." Garrus retorted with a cynical wit.

"Now, now, Kargas. Let's not be vulgar." Tarrik interjected - stepping forward to address the Normandy crew, with an arrogant air about his person. "My friends, if I could have your attention for just a moment." He calmly began to dictate. "I'm going to have to request that all of you stand up, and line yourselves up against that right wall over there-" He instructed, as he pointed a stubby, pincer-like finger against a plain, beige wall situated near the fore of the deck, which served as a median for a few of the abandoned eateries nearby. "-lest my krogan associate decide to riddle this fine young woman's head with holes in a most unseemly fashion. We do have business to attend to after all, and I'm afraid that you're in the way."

"What are you going to doâ€¦?" Garrus worriedly queried. "We won't let you harm these people. "

"And no harm will come to them." Tarrik adamantly conceded. "So long as you do as you're told, as you have been doing for the past few hours. Nowâ€¦ If you please-" He finished his sentence by putting out his hands, palms up, and raising them, to signify a request to rise.

The handcuffed squad shared an uneasy glance with one another. They each seemed to clench their lips, and give a dismal shake of their heads at the bleakness of the situation. But with nothing else to do, they each rose to their feet, and began to move.

"Oh no, not you my dear." Tarrik immediately advised, as he watched the sportcoat enrobed Vanessa rise to her feet, and follow the restrained entourage. "You may stay with the rest of the patrons here."

"I go with them." The business magnate, with eyes of amethyst, uncompromisingly declared.

"Eh, suit yourself." Tarrik nonchalantly capitulated, waving her away with a dismissive hand. He then turned to a few of the security officers behind him, overlooking the operation. "Get some restraints on her. And keep an eye on all of them. Don't want any brazenness

like before."

"Yes sir." An asari guard acknowledged, withdrawing a set of handcuffs from the rear of her belt, as she approached Vanessa and hooked her arms behind her back.

"That's right rufflesâ€|" Masters censured, with a condescending sarcasm. "Be a good little poodle and jump through the hoop for your masterâ€|"

"Funny." The asari snickered, as she tightly clicked the restraints on, intentionally pinching the woman's soft skin, before giving her a rigid shove forward. "Get moving."

"Alright Tarrik, now what?!" Kargas bellowed impatiently, as he maintained his clutch around the brunette crew member's arm, with his pistol aimed at her head. "If you really think this'll work, I don't understand why we don't just use this one. It worked on the others in his crew."

"Yes, but Shepard's special. And we require someone specialâ€|" Tarrik rebutted, as he slowly began to pace back and forth along the front row of hostages, studying each face with a scrutinizing eye. "This won't take me long. You may release her now."

Kargas scowled and sneered, as he unlatched his clasp around the crew member's arm, leaving a fading white mark where the blood had been cut off. On instinct, the trembling woman pulled away, nearly stumbling backwards.

"Thank you for your services, young lady." Tarrik instructed, as he continued to pace back and forth - his attention completely enthralled by his study of the faces in the crowd. "You may have a seat."

Gulping, the brunette crew member did what she was told, and hesitantly sat down at the front of the sea of hostages, just as Garrus, Jacob, Legion and crew took their own seats along the nearby right wall, under the supervision of five armed, uniformed, officers.

"What's he doing?" "What do they want with us?" "What do you think they're gonna do?" A series of frightened whispers and hushed utterances coalesced into an anxious, rumbling murmur from the vast crowd of life forms, as the stubby, arrogant volus paced back and forth before them, like a mounted general inspecting a cavalry line.

Suddenly, he stopped dead in his tracks, and took a long, hard, piercing look into the crowd. His eyes had fallen upon a family of three, huddled close together near the front.

"That one." Tarrik proclaimed, as he pointed his stubby finger into the agglomeration. "The little asari girl in the third row."

Her asari mother and salarian father exhaled a pronounced, collective gasp - clenching their daughter tightly in their arms, as Kargas lunged forward, towards them.

"No, you can't!" The child's mother screamed - embracing her with all

her heart and soul, as Kargas' pushed his way through the patrons in the front and second row, nearly trampling over them. "Get away!"

Kargas reached out, snatched her tiny little arm, by the wrist, and ruthlessly began pulling, in an attempt to pry her away from her parent's grip.

"Mommy!"

"No!" Her salarian father screamed in a panic fueled rage, as he stood up and pushed against the burly mercenary, without fear for his own life, but terrified for hers. "You're not gonna take my daughter!"

POW!

Eyes flew open wide, and the crowd screamed and gasped collectively, as a lone gunshot echoed throughout the Promenade Deck! The force from Kargas' handgun knocked the wounded salarian back down, into the crowd, as green blood oozed profusely from a newly rended hole in his arm.

"You son of a bitch!" Jacob shouted in a rage, as he shot to his feet, under gunpoint of the five armed officers before them.

"It's a flesh wound!" Kargas barked, as he took firm hold of the terrified child, and turned to face the stirring Normandy team. "The pyjack will live!" He declared, as he aimed his still smoking weapon down at the blue little girl, no more than five years of age. "But I swear on the blood of my ancestors that this child will DIE if you don't SIT BACK DOWN!" He snarled, spewing through gritted teeth like a rabid dog.

"Negative." Legion uncompromisingly declared - his metallic voice resonating throughout the room, as his silvery frame rose up alongside Jacob, and stood tall. "Release the adolescent. I will not allow this to transpire."

"Do you think I fear you, machine?!" Kargas bayed, in a bolstered tone, as he held the gun to the weeping girl's head. "Do you think I will hesitate to spill the blood of this child?!"

"NO!" Her mother cried out, with a horrified shriek, as she placed her frantic hands over her mouth, helplessly looking on. "Please! Please let her go!"

"Oy, leave the wee bairn alone, ya glaikit dobber!" The amber-haired Kenneth Donnely demanded, in his thick scottish accent, as popped up from his place on the floor, in the middle of the crowd, pointing a stern finger towards the krogan aggressor "Wanty bolt oan yer trolley, and leave us be!?"

"Yeah, leave her alone, you brute!"

"Unhand her, damn you!"

"Let her go!"

A roaring murmur overtook the crowd, as bodies began to sprout up

from the agglomeration, like pillars of righteousness. Angry, aggrieved bodies, crying out for justice.

"Why don't you pick on someone your own size, lizard lips-?!" Joker chided, as he too stood up from the affronted crowd. "-Like a brontosaurus!"

"ENOUGH!" The incensed krogan erupted in the face of the rising hostility. Holding onto the child's shoulder with an armored, iron, hand; he holstered his weapon and, in turn, immediately pulled out a small device which had been mounted onto the rear of his belt, next to his collapsed shotgun. "Do you know what this is?!" He demanded, holding up the small, red and silver, disk shaped device for all to see. "This is a Mark-14 high explosive fragmentation grenade!"

"Oh no!" Garrus exhaled a hushed whisper, under his breath, along with the collective gasp from the crowd.

"It has a fatality radius of five meters, an effective casualty radius of fifteen meters, and can launch shrapnel as far out as two-hundred and fifty meters!" The armored Krogan continued to disclose, as he held the incendiary device high above his head - exhibiting it the way a child would show off something special for show and tell. "This means that those of you that survive the initial blast, would be horribly burned or maimed IF the windows on this deck were to withstand the frag!" Kargas turned and looked over to the Normandy crew, specifically eyeing the standing Jacob and Legion. "And for those of you that think I am bluffing, than by all means, challenge me! Because a true krogan does not fear death. He welcomes it. So! Will anyone here challenge?!"

An austere hush seemed to fall over the crowd, as they looked on silently.

"Mommy!" The little asari girl wept, as she hopelessly reached out for her parents.

"Taliana!" The tears poured from her mother's eyes, as she could do nothing more but fruitlessly reach back. "Mommy's here, baby! I'm here!"

"...Legion!" Garrus pleadingly called out, from his seated place beside the geth. "Legion, listen to me! You have to sit down! We'll do something, alright? We'll do something! But we gotta pick our moment. We can't rush 'em quick enough without getting her killed..."

The valiant geth's head swiveled to look down at Garrus, who in turn looked back up with beseech in his eyes.

"You gotta sit." Garrus begged. "Trust me. Just sit!"

The panels upon Legion's head motored back and forth contemplatively, as he seemed to bow his head, and concede to Garrus' logic.

"Damn it!" Jacob exclaimed through his teeth, with a grimaced face, as he too returned to the floor. "All you bastards are gonna answer for this!" He forewarned, glancing up with a burning contempt in his eyes for the row of uniformed officers before him.

As Kargas watched the Normandy team resettle themselves into a placid state, he turned back to the primary body of hostages, assembled at his feet - a few of which still remained on their feet, like the skyscrapers over a metropolis. "Is there ANYONE who'll challenge?!"

The stirring conglomeration kept silent as death.

"No? Then sit down, and keep back!" The Blood Pack krogan ordered. The order was quickly obeyed, as Joker and Kenneth seemed to share an unspoken communion, indicating concede. They submissively sank back down to the floor, followed in doing so by the other few members of the crowd who attempted to rise up against their aggressors.

"Please sir! Please!" The girl's salarian father pleaded in tears - reaching his one good arm out toward her, as a nearby hostage, in a red medical staff uniform, crawled his way over the crowd to attend to him. "Give me back my little girl!" But his dire plea failed to even budge the callous mercenary.

"Somebody's gotta stop this!" Alex Farrell, the man with a bandaged skull who sat nearby as helpless as anyone else at this point, declared to the two women in his company. "We can't just stand by and watch this happen. First our Matthew, and now that poor little asari girl!"

"My god, Karin!" His wife Angela exclaimed, with a pronounced sense of dread and dismay echoing from her jittering voice. "What can we do?! How do we stop this?! What's gonna happen to that little girl?! What's gonna happen to any of us?!"

"I-I don't know!" Dr. Chakwas stuttered to respond, with a dubious and fearful shake of her head. "Damn it Shepard, where are you?!"

"Well done, my friend!" Tarrik commended Kargas, as he summoned the omni-tool on his forearm, and began to work on it. Meanwhile, the krogan returned the grenade to his belt, and pulled his sidearm back out - but he never let his grip on the little girl ebb in the slightest.

"That was a brilliant bluff." The volus added. "Your approach was impeccably convincing. Knew I not any better, I would think that you truly ARE irrational enough to eviscerate us all, heh." He chuckled to himself, as he manipulated the keys on his omni-tool, to summon a holographic camera drone.

Kargas stared blankly out, into the stars streaking by around the promenade - his eyes focused, and never wavering. "It wasn't a bluff!"

33. Chapter 33: An Offer They Can't Refuse

****Salvation: Episode I - The Taking of the Carmenta Illustria****

Disclaimer: This fan-fiction is part of an episodic series taking place after Salvation: A Half-Life/Mass Effect Universe Fan Fiction, which will lead directly to its sequel, Salvation II: Project

Prometheus. These episodes and sequel take place OUTSIDE of the Mass Effect 3 continuity. Characters property of their respective companies, Half-Life created by Valve and Mass Effect created by Bioware.

****Chapter 33: An Offer They Can't Refuse****

"Well, when we heard a lot of loud music and the sound of gunfire-" Miranda explained, as she reclined against one of the counter-tops in the medbay, with her bruised arms crossed. "We figured it was either you or Aria T'Loak. And since the 'queen' of Omega is scarcely known to take vacations, odds were that it was you."

Miranda, Gordon, and Ms. Cameron McClane all stood, lined up in a row, reclining against the same, gleaming, polished metal counter, topped with various medical scopes, devices, and accoutrements. Congruently, John and Tali leaned against one of the plush examining tables, with little Matty passively sitting on top, facing the opposite trio.

"How did this happen?" Gordon queried, with a shake of his head, and a shrug of his shoulders. "I mean this is my first 'cruise'-" He elaborated, air quoting with his fingers "-but, I don't imagine this sort of thing happens very often."

"It's always a danger, out in the black." Shepard retorted, with an exhausted sigh. "Even within Citadel Space. But normally a ship's security outfit would prevent things like this. Not incite themâ€¦"

"How does an entire security team go bad like thatâ€¦?" Gordon put forth, furrowing his brow with disillusion.

"Credits talk." John was quick to answer back.

"It's not just the ship's security, that's involved." Miranda added. "We had a run in with two rather zealous mercenaries. Blood Pack, judging by their armor and weapons."

"We know. We saw you." John replied with a casual nod towards his quarian love. "Tali here managed to seize control of the closed circuit security feeds. Which is why we came up here to help you two, but by the time we'd arrived, you were already gone."

"And with good reason." Miranda assured, with a mild titter. "We heard a sizeable security force approaching - we didn't exactly want to stick around. Besidesâ€¦ Looks like you had the situation well in hand."

Shepard smirked and scoffed under his breath, as he bowed his head and shook it.

"So what do we do now?" Cameron pointedly beckoned, clearly in no mood for levity.

"Well prior to coming up here, we DID manage to board the ship the hijackers used in order to send a distress signal to the Alliance." Tali assured, however taking a dreary, pessimistic tone. "Not sure what good it'll be, though. Since the ship's navigation was down there was no way to determine our course or destination."

"And even if there was, Hackett said that an M.E.F.I. wouldn't be much use against a ship this sizeâ€¦" Added Shepard.

A perplexed look came over Gordon's face. "An M.E.F.I.?" He questioned.

"A mass effect field inhibitor." Miranda aptly explained. "It's a device used to disable a ship's mass effect fields. C-sec and other authorities use them to incapacitate fugitive, pirate, or smuggler ships."

"Ah, I seeâ€¦"

"Listen." Miranda began again, this time with a more profound sense of urgency. "We know for a fact that this ship is going to head straight for the nearest mass relay, en route to the Terminus."

"Well that'd be the Alaeva Relayâ€¦" Tali put forth with a skeptical shrug of her shoulders. "We figured that's where they'd be going, but how can you be sure they'll make the jump to the Terminus? There's plenty of places in the Skyllian Verge they can disappear to, just as easily."

"Oh they're going to the Terminus." Miranda indubitably affirmed, with a definitive nod of her head. "We managed to overhear a conversation between two guards, who said there's a batarian slaver ship waiting in the Terminus, just on the other side of the relay. Soon as we cross, they'll board and take control of the hostages."

A grim expression overtook Shepard's semblance. "...You're sure you heard right?"

"She heard right, John." Gordon doubtlessly inserted. "That's exactly what they said. I was there."

"Uh huh, me too!" Cameron eagerly supplemented.

"Damn itâ€¦" Shepard condemned, with a groaning sigh, as he stepped forward, looked down at the floor, and dismally shook his head. "That's what I was afraid ofâ€¦" He continued, as he looked up at those before him. "They'd need a lot of manpower to take over a haul this size. That means a lot of slavers, all well armored, and packing some serious weaponryâ€¦ Nothing we couldn't handle under normal circumstances. But we've got no equipment, no contact with the others, and no bargaining postureâ€¦ We're at a serious tactical deficiency here."

"Yeah, WE were barely to survive those two in the red armor." Gordon nervously replied, as he glanced over at the battered Miranda, before turning back to John. "If even more were to board, I don't see how we could turn things in our favor. We have to stop this ship before it gets there."

As the group conversed, Tali suddenly felt a rigid, and anxious set of tugs at her arm, from the little boy standing by her side.

"Tali!" He nervously called out to her. "What's happening? What's Mr.

John saying? Are more bad policemen going to come?!"

"No, little one." Tali calmly whispered back to him, as Shepard continued to converse with Gordon and Miranda. "We're going to stop the bad men and get your mommy and daddy back before anything else bad happens. But for now, you have to keep quiet while the grown-ups talk, okay?"

"Okay!" Matty replied, disappointedly, as his eyes sank, and his head drooped.

"The Alliance is setting up a blockade at the Alaeva relay as we speak." John proceeded to elaborate, with a scowl and an indifferent shrug of his shoulders. "We had to assume that the hijackers would more than likely head that way. But unless the ones piloting willingly decide to stop, there'll be no way keep the ship from passing through the relay."

"Yes." Miranda snidely inserted, with a condescending timbre of sarcasm. "And I, of course, doubt the wonderful Alliance would ever dare tread into batarian territory, to save their own people."

"They wouldn't want to risk starting a war, Miranda." Shepard defensively retorted, with a bit of a grimace. "I can understand that. But it does still leave us on our own, against the clock."
"

"Just going off of gut instinct here-" Tali interjected, quickly circumventing the brooding conflict. "-I'd say we have twenty to thirty minutes before we hit that relay."

Gordon stepped forth to offer his thoughts. "Well, Miranda and I-"

"And me!" Cameron eagerly interrupted, with a modestly raised finger.

"Yes, uh!" And Ms. McClane, here-" He proceeded, as Miranda gave an irked roll of her eyes. "We were trying to make our way down to the engine room. Easiest way to stop the ship would be to disable the engines, right? After that, we just worry about dealing with the ones already on-board."

"No. That'd be too risky for a ship this big!" Tali decisively countered, with a shake of her head, causing Gordon's optimistic disposition to fade into a look of perplexed dubiety.

"If you sabotage the engines, you'd risk knocking out other vital systems." The knowledgeable quarain elaborated. "Maybe even life support. On top of that, a ship has to disengage FTL in a very specific sequence. If you were to disable the mass effect fields before disengaging the thrusters, it'd be like-"

"-like sending the entire ship slamming into the broadside of an asteroid!" Gordon abruptly added in, with his pupils rapidly fluttering back and forth like ping-pong balls, over a net. "Damn it, of course!" He snarled, with grit teeth, and clenched fist. "Without the effect of anti-mass on the ship, the immensely abrupt deceleration would tear the hull apart. Why didn't I think of that?! IDIOT!" As he pounded the butt of his palm to his forehead.

"Don't be so hard on yourself, Dr. Freeman." Tali said, compassionately, after watching Gordon beat himself up. "When you've spent as much time living aboard ships as I have, you learn these things."

"We'll move on the bridge." John calculatngly put forth, without reservation. "That's what me and Tali were gonna do. With the four of us it'll be no problem." He said, as he stepped towards the center of the group, extending his arms out to encompass the entire squad of fighters. "They're off balance, and reeling from casualties - I made sure of that. But we gotta move fast, before they have a chance to regroup."

"Okay, agreed." Miranda acknowledged, as Gordon too nodded in acceptance. "What do we have to work with? Anything on that equipment belt of yours, we can use?" She queried, as she motioned towards the mostly depleted belt still strapped around Shepard's waist.

"Nah, I'm bingo on everything." He said with a smack of his lips, and a daunted shake of his head, as he patted his hands against the various empty compartments of the belt. "Not even a can of mace. The only thing left on this thing is a spare handcuff key." He stated, as he tugged at silver key hanging from a loop above his right hip. "Lotta good that'll do us in a fight." He shrugged. "What about you two?" He asked, as he nodded towards the two weapons in Gordon and Miranda's possessions. "I see you've managed to arm yourselves. Any spare clips to go with those SMGs?"

"No, just what's in the chamber." Miranda said, with a sigh, as she raised the SMG in her hand up, to inspect it. "We didn't have an abundance of time to scrounge about, before the others showed up. I did manage acquire a bio-amp from a certain psychopathic asari, with an affinity for scalping, however." She claimed, with a shrug and a mild titter.

"Good enough." John conclusively affirmed, with a resolute nod.

Tali stood up right, from her former place, leaning against the nearby operating table, and joined John, Gordon, and Miranda, as they instinctively convened into what was almost a huddle.

"We'll recover what we can as we go." Shepard continued, as Cameron tip-toed, trying to catch a glimpse of the inner-circle, over Gordon's shoulder. "But we've got two civilians with us, one of which is a little boy. Their safety has to be priority one."

Gordon and Miranda both nodded in agreement, though Miranda's nod was a bit more nonchalant, then was his.

Suddenly, there came a blaring crackle of static that not only seemed to resonate within the room, but throughout the entire ship. The heads of the four shot up, as they poised themselves for combat, like a pack of wolves hearing a twig snap under foot. Their focus shot straight towards the still sealed door, and then quickly panned towards the opposite corner, where a static laced screen had unexpectedly lit up, exhibiting nothing but a monochromatic, snowy image.

"Listen to me!" A grizzled voice suddenly implored from behind the

crackling, as the snowy image began to take form. And the form it took, was that of the Carmenta Illustria's honorable Captain; Arthur Ryback, who stood firmly restrained from behind, with a gleaming, silver hand cannon precariously pressed against his right temple. "All of you!" He beckoned once more, with a cyclopean Asian male, keeping a firm hold on him. "I don't care what happens to me. But please... Please, don't let them hurt my passengers, or my crew...!"

"It's the Captain!" Gordon exclaimed, with dread and shock.

"McClane!" Miranda called out for the blonde, with a profound sense of urgency. "Quickly! Take the boy away. Back there somewhere." She abruptly instructed, pointing away towards the rear of the room, when she noticed little Matty looking on with wide-eyed intent, enthralled by the dire turn of events. "He doesn't need to be seeing this."

"Rightâ€¦!"

"No! I-I wanna stay with Tali!" The young lad declared, as he clung to the quarian's hand.

"It's alright. Go with the nice lady, Kresha." She urged, trying to mask her concern with a reassuring disposition, as Cameron came to take hold of Matty's other hand.

"Hi, Matty!" She greeted in a cheerful, amiable voice, as she pulled him away towards the rear of the room. "My names Cam. You know, I've got some really great games on my omni-tool we can play! Wanna play with me?"

"They're gonna use Ryback to draw us outâ€¦!" Shepard said, with a grim tone, as the four combatants stood looking on at the captive Captain on the screen. "They're gonna kill him if we don't do somethingâ€¦!"

Just then, there seemed to be a jump in the feed. A cascade of snowy static washed over the screen, and the entire image seemed to skip ahead several frames, like a needle jumping forward on a twentieth century record player.

The uniformed Security Commander slid the safety mechanism off his pistol with his thumb, and pressed it firmly against the side of Ryback's head, knocking his white naval cap off, and forcibly tilting his head to the side, etching a pained look onto his face.

"Keelah, no!" Tali cried out, and gasped, as the entire quartet stood looking on â€" their mouths opening wide, and their expressions growing ghastly pale. "John, what do we do?! They're gonna kill him!"

No sooner had poor Tali voiced her immense dread, when suddenly; without warning, or provocation, the fog-eyed Security Commander stepped out from behind the Captain. He turned, and extended his weapon hand towards Ryback's temple once again. And POW! Captain Ryback's eyes flashed and faded. He could actually be heard exhaling his final, dying breath, as the shot pierced his skull...

"No!"

"Keelah!"

"Bastards!"

Ryback's eyes opened wide from either shock, or agony, for an infinitesimal moment, before they slowly rolled back into his head, and closed, as he collapsed to the ground. It all happened so fast, and yet every tiny millisecond was so painstakingly distinguishable.

"Sons of bitches!" Shepard snarled, in a fury, after having just witnessed the good Captain get murdered, in cold blood.

"Oh my god!" Cameron exhaled a muffled whisper, as she couldn't help but glance towards the front of the room, upon hearing the resounding gunshot. She had her arm extended out in front of her, towards Matty, with a simple looking game on-screen, involving red and green dots on a screen. Perhaps some iteration of tic-tac-toe, or connect 4.

"What happened?!" The young boy implored, as he turned and tried to head back towards the group convened in front of the holo-screen. "I wanna go see!"

"No sweetie!" Cameron quickly negated, as she grabbed him by the shoulder, and pulled him back - instinctively wrapping her arms around him in an embrace. "Stay here. Don't look..."

"My god!" Gordon respired, outraged and appalled. "They killed him like he was nothing!"

Just then, something unexpected happened! The images on the screen before them stopped dead, frozen in place, like a paused video. Suddenly, the whole thing began to play out in reverse, at a much faster rate. The late Captain shot back up to his feet, and the exploded cavity in his skull retracted and mended itself. Ryback and Kim shuffled rapidly on their feet, as the video returned to its initial playback position.

"Listen to me!" The Captain pleaded once more, as the scenario played out again. "All of you! Do what you have to do... I don't care what happens to me. But please... Please, don't let them hurt my passengers, or my crew..."

"It's a damned recording!" Commander Shepard bellowed and sneered, with his white-knuckled fists clenched in a rage. "Ryback was already dead! They'd already killed him!"

Suddenly, and again, POW! The blood-curdling shot echoed out once more, piercing the honorable Captain's skull straight through. Somehow, somehow, the agony in his eyes seemed even more profound - more torturous than before, despite it being the exact same image played over.

As the quartet of combatants stood looking on, wincing and cringing with each painful, passing moment, the vid seemed to rewind itself yet again.

"Listen to me! All of you! Do what you have to do-"

"God damn it. They made their point!" John snarled, with a seething, unforgiving fury, bellowing from his chest, and a wrathful fire burning from his dusky-hued eyes. "What do they want?"

"-I don't care what happens to me. But please... Please, don't let them hurt my passengers, or my crew...!"

Despite the blood, death, and destruction they've all seen, none of them could stand to look on any longer. They turned away, just as POW! The Captain's fate was sealed yet again, as if he was destined to repeat the deplorable moment of his death for all eternity - immortalized by his own mortality...

"Tali, can you shut this off?" Miranda asked, sounding full of disgust and contempt, as she kept her eyes averted. Before an answer was returned however...

"Ahem!" The unexpected sound of a throat forcibly being cleared rang out, quickly coaxing the group to return their attention to the screen. Rather than repeating the cycle of death a fourth time, the Captain's visage had now been replaced by that of a stout and stubby volus, donned in Ryback's own pristine white naval cap.

"Well, I do hope that got your attention, wherever you may be!" Tarrik began, with a blithe, yet smug and sinister tone, as the camera framed his face and chest, with the silence-stricken sea of hostages glimpsed seated a short distance behind him.

"So he's the one behind all this?" Shepard uttered through gritted teeth, with a wrathful sneer on his face, and a flare of ire in his eyes.

"Must be the one we heard earlier?" Added Miranda.

"This is a message for the two men now loose on this ship, who go by the names of John Shepard, and Gordon Freeman?" Both men turned and shared a silent, uneasy glance with each other, before turning back to the respiring volus. "Do listen carefully now-!" He continued to delegate - raising a pointed finger up beside him, reminiscent of the way one Dr. Isaac Kleiner would do, while speaking. "-Because I have something very, very important I need to say!"

Shepard, Freeman, and company all stood by, quiet as dormice, rigidly anticipating the nefarious proposition that was surely to befall them.

"Pickles!" Tarrik suddenly proclaimed, in a blissful voice, as he looked up towards the ceiling, and clasped his hands together. "I love pickles!"

"...What?!" Gordon responded with what the entire team was surely thinking, as they all wrinkled their brows in befuddlement while continuing to look on.

"Frankly, I adore them, I truly do!" Tarrik jabbered on, with the intermittent hiss of his respirator. "Dare I say they're my favorite food... Now-" He continued, with a non-chalant shrug, and a casual

chuckle. "-Don't ever let it be said that I'm a fan of human cuisine. Yegch! No. I've always found human food to be rather bland and uninventive, at best. That is with one tiny exception, however. Oh pickles!" He said, euphorically. "Such tart and tangy, and sour and scrumptious little delights, Oh-ho-ho!" Just thinking about those crunchy little green beauties is making my mouth salivate! Mmm!" He purred lasciviously - sounding almost aroused!

"What the hell!?" Gordon exclaimed, enraged and at a loss. "Did this guy just kill the Captain so he could go off on some spiel about pickles?!"

"No!" John calmly answered back - shaking his head, as his skin crawled, and a sinking feeling settled into the pit of his stomach. "He's going somewhere with this! And I don't like it."

"There's just one tiny impediment that I ALWAYS run into while trying to get at them!" Tarrik proceeded. "You humans have this propensity for storing them in these impossible to open jars!" He declared, as he held his hands out, twisting them back and forth in the air, as if he were trying to open an invisible jar in front of him. "I swear, it's as if you're deliberately trying to keep me away from the one human foodstuff that I find even remotely palatable! Those lids are like strongboxes! I can never get 'em open!" He said, with a snicker and a shrug, as he shook his head and took a few steps to his right.

"But, such an aggravating obstacle is no problem at all, for someone with strong, capable hands like my powerful krogan friend, Kargas, here!" He assured, as the burly reptile came into view, when the camera screen panned over him.

Directly before the massive krogan, was a tiny little asari girl, surely no more than five years of age. She was utterly dwarfed by the armored gargantuan, like a human standing at the feet of a Combine Strider. Glossy rivulets marked the tracks of the tears running down her cheeks, from her glazed, red eyes. Kargas' massive hand encompassed her entire shoulder, as he held her firmly in place. The only thing she could do, was look on at the camera, terrified - body shaking, and her chin quivering. The look in her eyes cried out for help. Almost as if she was waiting for some hero to leap straight through the screen, and come to her rescue.

"Oh keelah, no!" They wouldn't!" Tali pleaded in horrified exclamation - her voice shaking as she nearly burst into tears herself.

"They would!" John was quick to answer back, as he shook his head and gulped. "And they'll sleep well tonight!"

"So! Commander Shepard! Dr. Freeman! I put it to you now!" The monstrous volus began again, as he stepped back into the camera frame, with the view zooming out to encompass him, Kargas, and their captive. "You've seen what we're capable of. You saw what we did to the Captain. By now, you doubtless realize we are VERY serious. So no more games, no more hiding! Believe my sincerity when I tell you that if you two do not make yourselves known, and surrender within the next 90 seconds, my krogan compatriot here is going to kill the child, and he is going to do it ugly! So please! Don't let the Captain's final, dying request be in vain! Surrender now, or Kargas

is going to twist her beautiful little head clean off of her innocent little shoulders!"

"NO!" A sudden, piercing shriek erupted from behind the volus, as a weeping woman shot to her feet, and tried to lunge forward, only to be restrained by a turian security guard. "No, please! Not my baby! YOU BASTARDS LET HER GO!" She pleaded and cursed in a state of hysteria. "How can you all just sit there?!" She shouted, as she looked over to the Normandy team, off screen. "Why won't any of you do something! Somebody do something!"

Paying no mind to the frantic woman behind them, the two malefactor's attention remained on the camera, as Kargas raised his left hand and placed it firmly atop the little asari child's head - clutching her fringes as if he was preparing to twist.

"Hmph!" Tarrik gave a smug snicker under his breath. "Just like twisting the lid off a jar." He affirmed with a shrug, as he materialized his omni-tool and punched in a few keys. At that moment, a timer reading 1:30 appeared on the screen in big, white letters, and began to count down. "You have 90 seconds."

With a flash of static, the screen went blank, save for the ominous timer rapidly winding down to zero.

1:27

1:26

1:25

"He's gonna kill her!" Gordon blurted out in his angst. "We have to do something!"

"We have to surrender ourselves!" Shepard acquiesced. Every passing second brought a new shudder to his body, as the thought of the girl's blood being spilled chilled him to the bone. "I've still got one of their communicators. I'll make the call." He conceded, as he raised his hand to his ear.

"Shepard, how do we know they won't just kill her after we've given ourselves up?" Miranda dismally queried.

"We don't. But what choice do we have?!" He barked in response, as he glanced up at the timer on the screen.

1:07

1:06

1:05

"I'm making the call."

"Shepard, wait!" Miranda insisted, with her hands raised haltingly. "I've got another idea...! You two were the only ones they specifically called for, to surrender!" She elaborated, as her pupils floated from Shepard to Gordon, and back again.. "Which means, they probably don't even know how many of us there really are."

"So-" She continued - a conniving grin coming over her semblance, as she summoned the omni-tool onto her forearm, and glanced over at Tali. Just then, a three-dimensional holographic representation of the Carmenta Illustria appeared, floating over Miranda's arm, with the complex labyrinth of air-ducts and ventilation shafts highlighted. "-I say we give them what they want..."

* * *

><p>0:45<p>

0:44

0:43

The newly armored Commander Andrew Kim glanced up at one of the many holoscreens, counting down to zero, within a barren hallway he patrolled. He had been joined by three blackguard brigand officers trailing closely behind, at his beck and call. The four moved casually along, with no hurried pace, and no intended destination in mind, passing screen after screen, with the same foreboding timer. It was the same across the entire ship - the same white clock ticking away the remainder of an innocent asari girl's life. Every holoscreen, every HV, every information booth, and every terminal... Tickâ€| Tockâ€| 0:36â€| 0:35â€| 0:34â€|

Kim exhaled a dubious sigh, as he raised his shotgun, and rested it across his shoulders. Suddenly, a crackle of static in his ear, followed by the ring of a dominant voice.

"This is Commander John Shepard, Alliance Navy." The incomparable voice declared, without equivocation. "Stop the countdown, and let the girl go. Both I, and Dr. Gordon Freeman surrender ourselves, unconditionally. You'll find us in the main hallway of the Galleria Deck."

A insidious gleam twinkled in Kim's one good eye, as he raised his hand, and pressed it to his communicator.

0:24

0:23

0:22

Each passing second was like a dagger through the souls of the gallant Normandy crew, as they sat helplessly looking on, while an anxious, appalled silence gripped the fearful hostages. Garrus, Jacob, and Mordin never once took their eyes off of the krogan and child, as a sense of desperation chilled their spines to the core. They didn't share a single word, but they each seemed to be thinking on the same wavelength, as they seemed to prime themselves - tightening their muscles and narrowing their gaze - no doubt planning to take some sort of action before the timer could reach zero.

Kargas' grip on the fearful child never waned, while Tarrik stood impatiently tapping one foot, with his arms crossed, as he looked up at the ominous ticking clock.

0:15

0:14

0:13

Tarrik sighed. "Disappointingâ€|"

Just then, Kargas bowed his head, and raised his hand to his ear, as a communique came in. "This is Kargas, I read you."

Tarrik turned back, brimming with a restored sense of self-confidence, as he watched the krogan commune.

"You're sure?!" Kargas responded - grinning with a mixture of anticipation and what could almost be called glee. "Good! Then bring him here! Bring him to me, alive!"

He paused for a moment, as Tarrik could make out a muffled voice chattering in his ear.

"Alright, guard yourself." The green-skinned krogan replied, with a nod. "This man is not to be taken lightly. Kargas outâ€|"

"Wellâ€|?!" Tarrik pleaded, tapping the tips of his fingers together in anticipation, like an anxious school-boy awaiting news of a snowday.

A diabolical grin grew, spanning across Kargas' face in its entirety, as he released the asari child with a shove. Looking back up at the terrifying figure only briefly, she took a moment to realize she had been freed, before immediately running back into the crowd, to be reunited with her parents - who were only too joyous and relieved to have her back, scooping her up in the tightest, most tearful embrace of her life.

"They've both surrendered themselves." The krogan enthusiastically proclaimed. "Kim's retrieving them as we speak."

34. Chapter 34: The Krait Viper

****Salvation: Episode I - The Taking of the Carmenta
Illustria****

Disclaimer: This fan-fiction is part of an episodic series taking place after Salvation: A Half-Life/Mass Effect Universe Fan Fiction, which will lead directly to its sequel, Salvation II: Project Prometheus. These episodes and sequel take place OUTSIDE of the Mass Effect 3 continuity. Characters property of their respective companies, Half-Life created by Valve and Mass Effect created by Bioware.

****Chapter 34: The Krait Viper****

The Galleria Deck was located directly above the Mezzanine Deck, and it was only fitting to sum it up as the shopping mall of the Carmenta Illustria. It wasn't the bustling hub of patrons and shoppers that it

would've been under normal circumstances. There was a ghostly feeling to it nowâ€¦ The life and spirit of this grandiose place had been plainly siphoned out. Most of the shop's windows and display cases were smashed apart, leaving nothing but the crystalline shards of glass behind. All valuables they onced housed had been pillaged, and the kiosks once housing a wealth of profits had all been broken into. Brightly luminescent holographic signs still danced and flashed over each individual establishment, but they were the only semblance of cheer left. The rest of the deck looked like something out of a dystopia. This deck, much like most of the ship, was a carcass now. Dried bones picked clean of its flesh by hungry scavengers.

Shards of glass crunched and crackled under the black boots of the armed and armored Commander Kim, as he strolled down the long, wide, and seemingly empty hallway amidst the looted shops. His three male, lapdog lackies - a turian, a salarian, and another human - followed closely behind. There was surely an air of angst about them, as they held their drawn weapons out in front, looking back and forth, every which way, as if expecting an imminent ambush. The only one that seemed even remotely stalwart was Commander Kim himself.

After a few more steps he came to a stop, and looked around at the vacated deck.

"SHEPARD!" He yelled out, with a hand cupped around his mouth - his voice resonating across the vastly empty deck, with a ghostly echo. "TIME'S UP SHEPARD! SHOW YOURSELF, OR THE KROGAN KILLS THE GIRL!"

Kim and his company all peeled their eyes, and tuned their ears - waiting for a reply or for some sign of movement. But the only response was the Illustria itself, mocking them with Kim's own echoed words.

"SHEPARD!"

"Right hereâ€¦" A calm, tranquil voice announced, as two battered figures emerged from a narrow maintenance hallway, tucked away between two of the shops. The four turncoat security officials immediately swung their weapons towards John and Gordon, with their fingers twitching on the triggers.

"Easy. You got us." Shepard nonchalantly declared, as both he and Gordon raised their hands up, and strolled out into the open. Both held a small submachine gun in their grip, but as they raised their hands, they let them hang, non-threateningly, by one finger, from their trigger-guards.

"Smart man." Kim snidely replied, with an arrogant glare, and a cocksure smirk, whilst keeping his shotgun drawn on the two men with their hands up. "Relieve them of their weapons." He ordered his men.

With a reluctant gulp, the subservient salarian, turian, and human officers moved forward, past Kim. They didn't let their guards down once, as they kept their handguns drawn on the two men, and tentatively took the submachine guns from them.

"Cuff 'em and search 'em!" Kim demanded. "Make sure they're not trying to pull a fast one by packing some hidden firepower."

"Yes sir." The brown-haired human officer replied, speaking for his other accomplices, as two of them drew their handcuffs from their belts, and used them to lock John and Gordon's arms back. The two warriors were then pressed firmly against the wall, with their legs spread, as the pat down began.

"So I finally get to meet the great Commander Shepardâ€|" Kim declared, with a heavy hint of sarcasm ringing in his voice. "The Savior of the Citadel, himselfâ€| The First Human Spectreâ€| The Paragon of Humanityâ€|! Heh." He scoffed. "Under normal circumstances, I guess it'd be an honor to meet the man who saved the galaxy from the Reapersâ€| But seeing as the Alliance is sort of on my shitlist, I'm not exactly fond of their favorite errand boy, either." He stopped and took a look around.

"Only two of you?" The one-eyed officer beckoned, with suspicion. "I find that hard to believe. Where's the rest of your crew, huh?"

"You know damn well you've already got the rest of my crewâ€|" The restrained Commander replied with ire and disdain.

"So this is it? Just you two? Nobody else...?" Kim asked, as he neared, and gave the two men a scrutinizing glance from top to bottom, while his men continued their frisking search.

"Not quiteâ€|" Shepard admitted, with marked reluctance. Still pressed up, face first, against the wall, he turned his head the opposite way, towards the recesses of the hallway that he and Gordon had just emerged from, and called out. "It's alright you two, you can come out."

Upon his request, a shadowy silhouette emerged from a darkened niche in the hallway. As the figure stepped out into the bright lights of the Galleria Deck, it was revealed to be the plucky, albeit somewhat blunderous reporter Cameron McClane, with the brown-haired little boy Matty, attached to her hand, at her side.

"They're not gonna hurt you." John knowingly assured, as the two timidly approached. "They know better."

"Search them too." Kim ordered, nodding towards the two indifferently.

"Yes sir." The turian said, in compliance.

"Rememberâ€|" John warned, in a foreboding tone, as the turian approached the timid pair. "You do ONE thing to hurt either of them, and there'll be no force in this galaxy that'll stop me from getting to you. You understand?"

"They'll be fine, Shepard." Commander Kim answered on the turian's behalf. "So long as you continue to play nice."

The turian dismissed Shepard's threats as the last stitch ramblings of a desperate man, as he locked Cameron's hands behind her back, like she were some petty criminal.

"Hey, hands off!" Shepard snarled, as he suddenly felt a small, cubic box being withdrawn from his right pant pocket, by his salarian

frisker. "I'm gonna want that back!"

"Hey, let me see that." Kim insisted, outstretching his hand, as he watched the salarian examine the box. At his Commanding Officer's request, the salarian turned and placed the box squarely into Kim's open palm. The box was small - covered in a soft, velvety material, and cordoned by a golden, glittering metallic band.

Kim grinned. He hooked the vinyl strap of his shotgun around his head and shoulder, allowing it hang at his side, as he pulled open the lid of the tiny, glimmering box.

"Whew..." Kim let forth a sharp whistle, impressed, as refracted rays of shimmering light suddenly speckled his face, like the beams from a disco-ball.

Resting snugly within the box was a flawless, pristine platinum wedding ring. Its band gleamed like a mirror. And resting on top was a swirling vortex of sterling silver and white diamonds - made out to look like the Milky Way itself. And at the galactic center of this miniscule star system, was a flawless tanzanite diamond - magnificent in size, and a brilliant shade of violet in color. A stunning and beautiful gemstone, that reflected the light it captured back at the observer with a lustrous and tantalizing luminance that was particularly hypnotic.

"Now that oughta be worth some credits, huh?" Kim said, greedily admiring the precious treasure for a moment longer. "This is an engagement ring, Shepard..." He stated, with a surprised timbre and a raised eyebrow, as he looked back up at their captives. "You were planning to pop the question on this trip, eh?" He asked, with a sarcastic snicker, as he snapped the box shut, and slipped it into his right pocket.

Even Gordon raised his eyebrows, in wonder, at the surprise revelation. But at this point in time, he wasn't sure if condolences or congratulations were in order...

"And this must be the lucky lady, now..." Kim stated with a fair amount of certainty as he walked a short distance towards Cameron, who was still in the middle of an overly thorough, and rather distasteful patdown search. "Don't see too many blondes around these days. Guess she must be your +1."

Shepard furrowed his brow, in befuddlement, as the equipment belt around his waist was unhooked by the human officer searching him. "My plu-? Yes!" John started to question, before quickly realizing Kim was referring to his +1 cabin booking. He abruptly cut himself off, and blurted out a response. "Yes, this is my, uh, girlfriendâ€¦ Carmen."

Cameron groaned under her breath, and rolled her eyes.

"Well, don't keep us all in suspense, baby girl." The maligned cyclopean officer beckoned, with an egotistical chortle. "Whaddaya say? You gonna marry the old navy varren, or whatâ€¦?"

"Oh, uhâ€¦ Darlingâ€¦!" Cameron began, nervously playing along, and attempting to fabricate a genuine sounding response. Unfortunately acting was far from her forte. "This is soâ€¦ unexpectedâ€¦ I'mâ€¦"

I-I'm speechless!"

"Hmphâ€|" Kim chuckled under his breath, with a snide look in his eye, as he stood by and watched his men continue their thorough, head to toe check of the captives for weapons or implements - a search that was mostly fruitless thus far, save for Shepard's ring.

"She doesn't sound all that excited, Shepard. That's gotta sting a bit." Kim remarked, as he withdrew his lighter and silver cigarette holder from the inside of his left pocket. "Anyway, don't start planning the wedding just yet." He said, as split open the cigarette case, revealing the serpentine engraving of a krait viper emblazoned onto the backing, behind his last cigarette - which he pulled out and slid between his lips. "You're all still rather fucked from where I'm standing."

"Hey, watch your mouth!" Shepard scolded, as he turned around and glared at the fog-eyed Commander.

"Oh right - the kidâ€|" Kim replied, nonchalantly, as he glanced over towards little Matty - who much like Cameron, Gordon, and John was also being subjected to a scrutinizing search. Despite the fear in his eyes, and the chagrin on his face, he took it like a trooper. "Must be the missing boy my guys were searching for." The malevolent officer took a long hard look at the child, from top to bottom. "He looks like he'll grow up strong.. He'd make a good candidate for the slave trade, wouldn't he?" He said in a voice muffled by the smoking cigarette pinched between his lips. "Just sayingâ€|"

"Never gonna happen." John asserted, with a sneering semblance of resolve, etched in stone, upon his face.

"Yeah, well you never know..."

Having finished his search, the human officer approached his superior. "Commander Kim." He addressed, with Shepard's confiscated equipment belt in hand, which was identical to the one currently wrapped around his own waist.

"Ahâ€|" Kim exhaled a puff of smoke out of the side of his mouth, as he took devoid belt in hand. "Is this all he had on him?" He asked, as he began inspecting each of the vacated compartments, with his fingers.

"Yes sir."

"Wait a minuteâ€|" John chimed in, as a realization suddenly dawned on him. He squinted a bit, as he focused on the corrupt head of security's scar-marked face. "You're Commander Kim?"

Continuing to pore over the belt, Kim glanced up at Shepard with a crooked, cocksure grin, and a snidely sinister glint in his eyes, before looking back down.

"I thought you looked familiar!" Shepard declared, sneering and wrinkling his nose with a sudden look of disgust coming over his expression. "I know youâ€|" You're Andrew Kim! Former Alliance. You're the one they used to call the Krait Viper!"

"Hmph." Kim chuckled under his breath, blasting out a puff of smoke

with the laugh, as he shook his head. "Now there's a name I ain't heard in awhileâ€|"

"Well, what I heard is that you were court-martialedâ€|" John was quick to rebuke, causing Kim to immediately look up with a wrathful glare. "Dishonorably discharged for incompetence of command."

"That's not what happened, Shepard!" Kim erupted in response, spitting up through his teeth, as the sides of his jaw began to flutter from the pressure he was putting on his jaw.

"Oh, of course it wasn't!" John countered, with a sarcastic shrug. "You just led your whole team into a blatant trap, on Naftor. Got almost all of them killed."

"THAT'S NOT WHAT HAPPENED GOD DAMN IT!" The one-eyed officer snapped back in a frenzied rage. "It wasn't me! It was thatâ€| that son of a bitch, Piedras! He was the one in command!"

"...Piedras?" Shepard questioned, raising a perplexed eyebrow. "Diego Piedras?"

"That's rightâ€|" Kim replied, respiring rapidly, as his agitated state returned to normal. "That dumb shit couldn't lead a whore to a bedâ€| Anyway, the way I see it, this is my way of claiming what's owed to me after being handed a life sentence of bullshit!"

"Whether that's true or not, it doesn't give you the right to destroy the lives of innocent people like this!" John asserted, shaking his head with a grimace void of tolerance or clemency. "You think you're the only one who's ever been led into an ill-fated situation because of faulty intel? I was on Akuze, you son of a bitch!"

"That's different, Shepard!" Kim screeched back - walking straight up to him with an incensed sneer, and shaking a condescending finger in his face, as he let the confiscated equipment belt hang down from his other hand. "YOU were praised! Hailed as a fucking hero! I got fed to the wolves! Cast out like I was some snot nosed private who pissed his pants in the face of the enemy!"

He bowed his head, and exhaled a shaky sigh. "...Do you have any idea what it's like, Shepard?" He asked in a more tranquil tone, almost a whisper, as he looked back up. "Being cashieredâ€|? I stood there, with one eyeâ€| and half my face sewn up with stitches..." He admitted, hovering his hand over the left side of his face, as a look of agony and rue overtook his expression. "... stood there, watching as they ripped the uniform off my chest, and spat on my dignityâ€|"

"And thenâ€| when all I had left was the shirt on my back, they turned me around-" He said, as he about-faced, as if reliving the moment in dreadful detail. "-and forced me to walk down an aisle of my own fellow Navy men-" He declared as he began a slow, methodical march a short distance away. "-who all turned their backs on me as one final 'fuck you, farewellâ€|'".

"The system is far from perfectâ€|" John affirmed, pleading for the man to listen to reason. "But these people - the hostages you took - they're not soldiers! They're not to blame for what's been done to

you! They're innocent!"

Kim closed his eyes, as he reflected on Shepard's words for a split second. "So was Iâ€¦"

"Dang it, that's enough you swine!" Came a woman's shriek, as she protested yet another search of her person. "You know darn well I'm clean, by now! All you're doing is feeling me up!"

"Hehâ€¦" The degenerate turian officer sensually rubbing his hands up and down Cameron's curvaceous body gave a lewd snicker, as he finished by patting her rear with an open palm. He then drew his gun forward and rested it on her shoulder, like an epaulette. "You like my gun? Big, isn't itâ€¦?"

"...Honey, I've seen bigger. MUCH biggerâ€¦" Cameron replied, wrinkling her nose with disgust.

John and Gordon both looked over, as this started to play out.

"Heyâ€¦" Shepard called out. "Leave her aloneâ€¦" He ominously demanded.

The turian shrugged the warning off as if it was nothing.

"You wanna touch itâ€¦?" He asked, lasciviously. "You can touch it if you wantâ€¦ Justâ€¦ be careful - don't want it going off in your handsâ€¦"

"Happens to you a lot, don't it?" Cameron cynically fired back.

"Hey!" Shepard called out again, this time sounding much angrier. "I said leave. Her. Alone... I'm not gonna say it again."

The turian glanced over to his right, turning his attention away from the attractive blonde, to the battered and bruised captive.

"And just what are you gonna do, if I don't, huh?" He arrogantly taunted, strolling over towards Shepard with a pompous strut and a cocksure grin. He walked right up to him, fearless and foolish, and aimed his gun, point-blank, right into his face.

Shepard peered into the turian's eyes. There wasn't intimidation there, though. The only thing John reflected with his eyes was a patronizing look, as if to say: "...really?" _

"You gonna shoot me, Shepard? Is that what's gonna happen? Whatcha gonna do?" The turian continued to jeer and berate, as Kim looked on, sighing, rolling his eyes, and shaking his head, as if he knew what was about to happen. "You're cuffed. You got no weapons, got no armor. Whatcha gonna do, huh? And don't even THINK about trying anything funny!"

"You leave him alone!" A little voice demanded, as Matty intrepidly stepped forward, with an angry and fearless little sneer on his face. "You're a BAD policeman!"

The turian glanced to his left ever so briefly, and admonished. "Shut

up kid, or you will pay!"

Suddenly, as he turned back, the world flashed in red! A jolt of pain shot through his nose, and across his face, as Shepard careened his forehead straight into the turian's smug snout, with the force of a punch from a heavyweight prize fighter. Reacting with a base instinct, the turian released the lax grip on his gun, letting it drop, as he brought both his hands up to his aching face, and covered his nose with his palms. As he squirmed and muttered in anguish, Shepard raised his right leg, hooking it around the turian's left, like a winding vine, and pressed down on the back of his knee, like a lever, causing him to genuflect down onto the floor. Before he even knew what was going on, the turian pried his hands away from his face, and looked up at Shepard just in time to see another flash of red, as the Commander's high knee found its mark on his jaw. The blow knocked the turian to the ground, sprawling him out on his back. With the cocksure officer writhing and wriggling around on the floor, in agony, John made it a point to look up at the one-eyed leader of this pack, as if giving him a preview of things to come, as he raised his foot, and bridged it firmly across the felled turian's throat.

"Ack-augh!" The officer coughed and gagged, as his air supply was completely restricted. He wrapped his hands around Shepard's ankle in a desperate attempt to free himself, but it was to no avail. The man standing over him could end him now, if he so decided to. A bit more pressure is all it would take...

Kim looked down at the struggling turian, watching his eyes dim, as his respirations grew further and further apart, with his flailing growing weak and languid.

"Alright Shepard, that's enough!" Kim demanded, almost pleadingly. "That's enough god damn it, let him up. You've made your point."

John smirked with a splotch of silver blood smearing his forehead, as he kept his foot on the officer's throat a moment longer, before finally yanking it off.

"AUGH! ACK!" As soon as he could breath again, the turian gasped - drinking in the precious air as deeply as he could, followed by a sputtering series of throaty wheezes and coughs. He rubbed his aching neck with his hands, thanking his lucky stars he could taste oxygen again, as he rolled onto his side into an almost fetal position.

"Alright you, get up!" Kim demanded, with a shamed and pitiless look in his eye, as he delivered a rigid kick, just hard enough to add insult to injury, into the turian's gut. "Get your dumbass up! That'll teach you not to act big shit if you can't back it up."

As the turian peon staggered to his feet, still coughing and wheezing, Gordon leaned over to Shepard, grinning, and simply whispered. "That was funnyâ€¦"

John smirked and chuckled under his breath as he glanced back and nodded. "Yep."

"Alright, Shepard..." Kim began again, glaring down the Alliance

Commander with a irritated scowl. "Granted this prick had that coming-" He said, pointing at the bloody-nosed turian still trying to steady himself. "-but you pull something like that again, and I promise you that little asari girl upstairs will never see the light of another day."

The self-confident grin beaming on Shepard's expression was wiped away into a look of reluctant obedience, as he exhaled an exasperated sigh.

"Now thenâ€¦" Kim continued, back to business, as he raised the empty equipment belt he was still toting around for the prisoners to see. "The handcuff key is missing from this belt." He said, tugging on a keyless metallic loop. "Where is it?!"

John shrugged, indifferently. "Must've dropped it somewhere."

"Yeah, I'll betâ€¦" Kim replied with a plain sense of dubiety. "You checked them all?" He asked - turning to his other two officers, who had just about finished their physical searches. "Top to bottom. They were clean?"

"Yes sir." The human, who had conducted his frisk of The One Free Man acknowledged, as he turned back to Gordon - finding something strange and eerily familiar about him. "All except for the targeting visor this one's wearing." He said, as he reached for Gordon's face, to remove the visor.

"I wouldn't do that if I were youâ€¦" Shepard coyly objected, with a brash shake of his head, causing the human officer to stop, mid-reach. "Don't you know who that is? That's Gordon Freemanâ€¦ The last ones who messed with his eyewear were the Reapers, and look what happened to them. Not to mention the Combineâ€¦"

The officer looked upon the face of the man before him, truly for the first time. Sure, he had made him as a sturdy and bruised caucasian male, mid to late twenties, with a goatee, and brown, haphazard hair. But looking up, past the glowing ribbon of indigo blue light, and into those jade green eyes, he saw something that chilled him to the core. His eyes were cold, and unfeeling. It wasn't a look of ruthlessness or inhumanity. There was compassion and mercy buried somewhere deep in those swirling green pupils. But none of it was to be for him or his traitorous accomplices. "Whatever it takes, I will make you answer for what you've done here..." His burning gaze shouted, louder than words ever could.

As if being suddenly stricken with a debilitating sense of terror, the officer gulped, lowered his hands, leaving the visor alone, and slowly backed away.

"Gimme a breakâ€¦" Kim sighed, and rolled his eye, as he stepped up to Gordon. "Soâ€¦" He said, looking him square in the eye. "You're the Legendary Gordon Freeman, eh?"

Gordon's only response was to bounce his eyebrows twice, as if to taunt and threaten, while a sinister glint of danger shone in his eyes.

"Hmâ€¦ Not bad for a two-hundred year old dead guy." Kim cynically replied, crossing his arms, and tapping a finger against his chin, as

he looked over Freeman from top to bottom. "Though I imagine he'd be a little taller."

"You gotta admit, sirâ€¦" The shaky voice of the human officer interjected from over his shoulder. "He DOES look an awful lot like the real Gordon Freemanâ€¦"

Kim swiveled his head, and glared an irate hole straight through his subordinate, who immediately zipped his mouth, bowed his head, and choked back any further words.

After a short, silent scolding, Kim turned back around. "So, how 'bout it, chiefâ€¦?" He asked, with a shrug. "You the real Gordon Freeman, or what?"

"..."

"Where's yourâ€¦ Where's your famous crowbar, huh?" He continued to interrogate, looking around behind Gordon's back, as if hoping to find it - instead spotting the metallic cast on his cuffed left arm, for the first time. "Or how 'bout that gravity gun of yours? Or the HIV suit?"

Aside from a disparaging look and a condescending glare, Gordon's response was again the same.

"..."

"How 'bout Alyx Vance, hmm? Where's she at?" He sarcastically beckoned, with his eyebrows raised, inquisitively. "No room in the time machine for two?"

This particular query did definitely incite a facial response, on Gordon's behalf, despite his best attempts to remain solemn faced. The expression was an amalgam of loss and sorrow, guilt and regret, as well as anger - anger for the audacity of this man to pose such a question.

"What's the matter, huh?!" Kim continued to berate, growing noticeably irritated with Gordon's silence. "Don't you got nothin' to say?!" He demanded, with a light, one-handed shove.

"He IS SO the real Gordon Freeman!" Cameron let out an indignant shriek, tired of watching her savior get reviled. "He doesn't have to prove it to you! And it's called an H_E_V suit, you dumb lummoX, read a history book sometime!"

"Heheheâ€¦" Kim scoffed arrogantly, and shook his bowing head. "Wow, you even got the Misses believing, eh Shepard?" He asked, briefly glancing over at John. "Where'd you even find this guy?" He beckoned with an almost gleeful exuberance, as if he were watching some astonishing side-show attraction at a County Fair. "Was he standing out in front of a mattress store somewhere, advertising a big Liberation Day sale, or something?"

"Yeah, you wishâ€¦" John snidely replied, while again Gordon stirred in silence.

Just then, Kim's jovial air faded to a more austere look. His wide, toothy grin curtailed into to a devious smirk, and his eyes narrowed

with malicious intent. "You knowâ€¦ They say only two types of people don't buckle when they've got a gun in their face; trained killers and psychopathsâ€¦" He said, as he raised his shotgun, aiming the barrel directly at Gordon's head. "And you don't look like a trained killer to meâ€¦"

Gordon stared down at the black, carbon-scored barrel. He may as well have been looking down at a french baguette, as he quickly glanced back up at Kim with a look of utter indifference in his eyes. He then began to lean forward, ever so slowly, causing Kim to wince and tighten his grip around the trigger a bit tighter. Before he knew it, Gordon had leaned in close enough that the barrell was nestled against his neck, just under his chin.

"Guess that makes me a psychopathâ€¦ don't it?" He uttered with a deadpan whisper.

Kim gulpedâ€¦ Despite his very best attempt to remain steadfast and unflinching in the face of this obvious imposter, he couldn't help but feel a little daunted at his callous display of brazen intrepidity. The cyclopean nodded, lowered his weapon, and took a step back. Without saying a further word, he waved the prisoners on with barrel of his gun, and motioned with his head for them to move down the hall.

"Alright, let's go." The subservient human officer ordered, as he took point and began to lead the group. Kim kept watch in the middle, while the salarian and turian, who was still reeling with a track of bluish blood running down his mouth and chin from his nostrils, brought up the rear.

Shepard and Freeman both gave the one-eyed Security Commander the same condemning look, before about-facing and starting to move. As Gordon gave his back to Kim, the officer quickly stepped up behind him, and struck his metallic cast hard with the butt of his shotgun.

"ARRGH!" Gordon bayed in agony, clenching his eyes, gritting his teeth, and spinning himself around as a sharp twinge of pain shot into wounded arm.

Shepard immediately swung himself about to see what was going on. As Gordon continued to creek in pain, looking at Kim with a perplexed look, there came a discouraging soundâ€¦ Ping!

It was the sound of a tiny, silver key sliding out of Gordon's cast, after having been knocked free, and hitting the floor.

"Well, wellâ€¦" Kim arrogantly commented, as he ushered Gordon aside with his pointed shotgun. "What do we have here?" He asked sarcastically, as he bent down to retrieve the key, and examined it pinched between his fingers. "'Must've lost it somewhere', eh Shepard?"

"Heh." He chuckled and grinned. "You know, they say Gordon Freeman ALWAYS had a trick up his sleeve." He mocked the Free Man, as he tossed the key up and snatched it out of the air, into a tightly clenched fist. "So much for yoursâ€¦" He derided, as Shepard and Gordon watched him stuff the liberating key into his left pant pocket.

John exhaled a disheartened sigh. "...Shit."

35. Chapter 35: Dissension

****Salvation: Episode I - The Taking of the Carmenta
Illustria****

Disclaimer: This fan-fiction is part of an episodic series taking place after Salvation: A Half-Life/Mass Effect Universe Fan Fiction, which will lead directly to its sequel, Salvation II: Project Prometheus. These episodes and sequel take place OUTSIDE of the Mass Effect 3 continuity. Characters property of their respective companies, Half-Life created by Valve and Mass Effect created by Bioware.

****Chapter 35: Dissension****

Leahr'Haan sat at the foremost console on the bridge, as the zooming stars outside painted their streaking reflections on his burgundy faceplate. The holographic controls in front of him were lit up, showcasing a vast array of readings and indications. Near the edge of the console, upon a small ledge, rested his laptop, which showed the position of the remaining mechanized troops still on roving patrol throughout the grand Illustria. Only about three quarters of the initial number of units brought on-board still remained online.

Leahr subtly glanced over his shoulder, and swiveled his chair around a few, acute degrees. The Bridge, which had formerly been occupied by Commander Andrew Kim, Weyrloc Kargas, and the de facto Captain; Tarrik Shon, was now instead occupied by himself, and two rather burly looking security officers, standing guard by the bridge entrance - or for his intents and purposes, the bridge exit.

Both guards, a pair of brawny human males, stood poised, with their chests out and their hands clasped behind their backs, with the guise of Military MPs standing watch over a secure facility. Upon noticing the antsy quarian's eyes upon them, they reciprocated with a cold, hard, gaze, as if to say "try to escape, and we'll shoot you dead."

Leahr grit his teeth under his mask, as a sense of determination overtook him. He coyly turned back around and went to work on his laptop. Like a master pianist whose fingers danced upon the ivories, his fingers punched away at the holographic keyboard, with a blistering series of swipes, strokes, and clicks.

The halls of the Illustria were empty now. The officers had finished their sweeps for stragglers and valuables, and had mostly retreated back up to the Promenade Deck Casino, where the immense number of hostages were still being detained. The only ones that still lingered within the barren innards of the rest of the ship were the LOKI assault mechs. They continuously wandered the halls in a heedless, pre-programmed routine that they dared not deviate from. But just then, across every level of the ship, port to starboard, aft to fore, the entire ensemble of mechanized troops came to an utter and complete halt, in perfect, synchronous unison. They stood there for a moment; motionless metal statues, frozen in time. And then, just as

abruptly as they had come to a halt, they suddenly began moving again. Many continued on in the exact same direction they were going, while others did a complete 180, and turned about in the other direction. Some mounted stairs and began to ascend, while others higher up began a descent. Slowly, lone wanderer mechs unified with other units, becoming duos and eventually trios, and quartets. Whatever they were doing - wherever they were going - one thing was clearâ€¦ They were converging the same location.

* * *

><p>A salarian security officer was the first to exit the stairway, into a long, curved hallway - or more accurately, a long, curved promenade.<p>

The floors here were made of fine, polished, cherry wood planks, and ever so often you'd stumble upon a lounging chair, or some benches and a table. One could simply come out here and take a leisurely stroll that would circumvent the entire ship, or simply sit back and watch the stars whiz by outside at faster than light speeds. It wasn't unlike the promenades that circled the decks of normal, sea-fairing cruise ships. Really the only difference was, instead of looking out onto a vast, endless ocean, where the sun would bid the horizon goodnight - there was an infinitely expansive universe of blazing, celestial bodies burning against an ocean of black ether.

But as breathtaking as it could be, it may as well have been a poorly printed Starry Night reproduction hanging in a dentist's office, as a small train of captors and captives stepped out of a nearby stairway, and onto the promenade. John Shepard was the next one out, behind the salarian, followed closely by Dr. Freeman, Commander Kim, Cameron McClane, little Matty Farrell, with the human and turian officers bringing up the rear.

Kim kept a tight grip on his shotgun, as he held it aimed squarely into Freeman's back, even though he showed no immediate intent to use it.

Behind him, Cameron kept a firm grip on little Matty's hand, who obediently followed along. Cameron would look down ever so often, and give him a smile, which he generally tried to reciprocate. But she could feel the tremble of his body coursing through his shivering little hand. Her only hope was that he wasn't feeling the shaking of hers.

"So now what are we supposed to doâ€¦?" Gordon asked, leaning forward, as close as he could to Shepard, without trampling the backs of his heels, as they marched on. "You said they'd never find that keyâ€¦"

"I didn't think they would." John subtly replied, ever so slightly reclining his head back. "They don't seem all that smartâ€¦ Of course, I wasn't counting on Krait-Viper Kim being here. From what I've heard, the guy's no joke."

Kim chuckled under his breath, and grinned self-confidently - obviously aware of everything that was being said - as they moved on through the promenade.

"...Well, what are we gonna do now?"

"You're the one with PhD, aren't you?" Shepard replied, with a mild, sarcastic titter - doing his best to offer up some levity in spite of the dire situation. "Why don't you think of something?"

"Hey, I usually just fly by the seat of my pants." Gordon rebutted, with a discontented shrug, as they approached the glowing entrance to the Promenade Deck's casino. "Plans and strategies are supposed supposed to be your department, aren't they?"

"Alright, that's enough, shut up!" Kim scalded, jabbing the barrel of his shotgun hard, into Gordon's back, causing him to stumble forward a bit. Gordon turned and glared a hole straight through the baleful cyclops.

"Keep it moving, Mr. 'Free Man'." Kim chided, with his gun in Gordon's face.

"It's alright, Gordon." Shepard reassured, trying to keep his friend from doing something rash, as he too turned to look back. "Don't worry, we'll think of something."

Gordon's ire-imbued stare faded to a look of concede, as he slowly turned back around, and marched on. From the doorway ahead, they could hear a cacophony of indiscernible chatter, and see a flickering, orange glow spilling out from the entrance.

They stepped into the massive room, and immediately their eyes swept across the frightened, pleading faces of a thousand distressed souls. Thronged across the floor, where there once stood skyllian-5 tables, Quasar machines, and roulette wheels, was a disarrayed horde of frightened passengers, from all walks of the galaxy.

"MATTY!" A high-pitched shriek, resonating with fear, relief, joy, and angst, erupted from the crowd, as a woman in a silky, dark green evening gown shot up from the floor, and dashed in Shepard's direction - heedlessly clambering over anyone and anything in her path. That is until she was forcibly held back by two of the officers who had secured an impassable perimeter around the seated hostages.

"No! Let me go! That's my son!" She begged and pleaded, as a man in a dark gray dinner suit, with a bandaged head wound staggered over to her side, and joined her in trying to push through.

"Mommy! Daddy!" Young Matthew cried out at the sight of his parents, as he reciprocated their desperation by trying flee towards them, only to be held back, by the collar, by their human officer escort. "No! Leave me alone! That's my mom and dad!"

"He just wants to go to his parents!" Shepard declared, hiding some semblance of a plea beneath his commanding presence, as he turned to face Kim. "Let him go."

"Matthew! Son!" His father cried out, trying to push through the barricade of guards, in a feeble, weakened state.

Kim shrugged and acquiesced, as he turned to his human subordinate. "It's alright, let the kid go." He ordered, pointing a backwards

thumb over his shoulder, towards the boy's parents.

The officer obediently released his hold on Matty, who immediately took off running forward. But he wasn't more than a few steps out when he screeched to a halt, and turned back to look at Shepard, with a tearful semblance in his eye. He pointed up at John and looked over at the one-eyed instigator. "Let them go tooâ€¦!" He begged, with a trembling chin, as tiny teardrops dripped from his eyes.

"No, trooper. It's okay." John assured, with a shake of his head. "Don't worry about us. Go to your parentsâ€¦!"

Matty stood there for a moment, refusing to move, as he sniffled and cried.

"Really buddy, it's okay. Go onâ€¦!"

Matty turned around slowly, as if not wanting to take his eyes off Shepard, for fear of it being the last time he would ever see him again. But eventually, the love and want of his parents took over, especially when he saw them reaching for him. He shot forward, across the casino's carpeted floor, as fast as his little legs could carry him.

"Oh, Matty! My beautiful little boy!" Angela exclaimed, as her son ran into her arms, past the blockade of officers. She scooped him up in her arms, as she and his father both embraced him tighter than they ever had before, planting a non-stop barrage of kisses and caresses on his face. "Oh, thank god! Thank god! Thank god!" She cried out, bursting into tears.

"Son, are you alright?! Are you hurt, son?!" His father beckoned, as he ran his hands up his back and down his shoulders to search for injury.

"No, daddy I'm okayâ€¦!" Matty bashfully assured.

"Oh my godâ€¦!" Alex exhaled a tremendous sigh of relief, as the largest knot he had ever felt lodged itself into his throat. He leaned forward, kissing his boy upon the brown hair on his head, as he embraced him tightly. He then looked up towards the two battered figures, brought in in handcuffs, who were obviously the ones responsible for getting their son back to them.

"Thank youâ€¦!" He shouted across the room, with tears flooding his eyes. "By god, thank you!"

John nodded, exhibiting a forlorn smile, as a large knot crept into his own throat.

"Well, isn't that just the most touching thing you ever sawâ€¦!" A shrill, grating voice, followed by a sharp respirator hiss, declared with an exaggerated helping of sarcasm. "I just love tearful reunions, like this!"

John, Gordon, and Cameron all looked to their left, toward the source of the abrasive voice, to find a haughty volus, poised with a regal stance, and a white naval cap upon his brow.

"You must be Tarrikâ€¦!" John decidedly conjectured through tightly

gritted teeth, as if doing his best to restrain his every impulse of rage and violence.

"Indeed I am!" The imperious volus asserted, as he stepped forward, like a triumphant conqueror. "And you are the great Commander Shepard! The Reaper Slayer himself! accompanied by the one who, I can only assume, is the man they call Gordon Freeman!" He reverently proclaimed, as he looked over the battered scientist. "The Opener of the Way, if I'm not mistaken!"

"I did a bit of Extranet research on the two of you, while I was bottled up in that alcove of a bridge." He elaborated, as he placed his hands behind his back, and turned about, beginning to pace around in soliloquy. "And I must say, I'm both impressed and fascinated. It is beyond me how you obtained such a man as this, into your employ, Shepard." He said, befuddled, as he pointed a stubby arm towards Gordon. "And yet, lo and behold! Here the two of you are! Humanity's greatest exemplars! brought before me in chains!"

"Alright, listen here you little hot air buffoon." John angrily began to dictate - clearly having had enough of the little creature's self-loving spiel. "I've had just about all I can stomach from you. I'm gonna give you one chance, and one chance only, to walk away from this with your life, you understand me?"

"Hot air buffoon?!" Tarrik snapped back, appalled at the audacious insult. "How dare you, Earth Clan! You are in no position to arbitrate ultimatums! And I'll have you know that it was my brilliance that orchestrated this entire endeavor!"

"Brilliance?!?" Shepard retorted sarcastically, as he tried to choke back a muffled chuckle. "You paid off a bunch of lunk-head security guards and stormed the ship! I'll grant you, it was effective!" He admitted with a loathful nod. "But brilliant is a bit of a stretch! Though, I'm sure you know a thing or two about stretching, don't you stumpy?" He quipped with a tumultuous chortle.

"Insolent knave!" Tarrik barked in retaliation, quickly losing his calm and composed disposition. "You will address me as Captain Shon, and give me the respect I so rightly deserve!"

"Captain Shon?! Hahaha!" John deliberately broke out into an unrestrained guffaw, as several of the hostages actually did the same - their laughs quickly grating against Tarrik's self-absorbed nerves. "This is bad comedy!" John expressed, pretending to not be able to contain his laughter. "Though I will admit, it's got me laughing, hahahaha!"

"Stop it!" Tarrik forcefully demanded, pointing a sharp, stubby finger up at the cackling Commander. "You will not laugh at me!" Suddenly, a dejecting sound found its way to his ear canals. It was the sound of a rambunctious murmur beginning to grow from whispers to laughs, as many of the hostages joined in Shepard's amusement. "Stop it! All of you! Stop laughing at me!"

"Enough!" A harrowing, dominating voice rang out - echoing throughout the deck, like a thundercrack booming across a stormy night sky.

Without fail, the mutter of laughing voices was quelled into silence, as Shepard turned to face it's source; a massive, hulking silhouette waiting in the shadows of a nearby pillar. As silence swept across the room, the figure emerged from the shade, stepping out into the ambient, orange glow.

It was a krogan; scarred and bitter-faced. His flesh was a pale shade of green, in contrast to the bright, lime colored osteoderm plating crowning his head. He wore a sturdy and weathered set of armor, maroon in color and laden with the markings of a thousand won battles. Upon each of the shouldered, etched in chipping white paint, were two matching crests - an angry skull with the teeth and jaw line comprised of a tightly clenched fist. The mark of The Blood Pack.

"Shepardâ€|" Kargas calmly addressed, as he encroached upon the handcuffed Commander. "I've been waiting a long time to confront you face to faceâ€|" He said, as he stepped right up to John. "Do you know who I amâ€|?"

Shepard pretended to not understand the severity of the dire situation, despite knowing full well what it meant to stare down a Blood Pack krogan. "...The event coordinator?" He sarcastically remarked, with an indifferent shrug.

Kargas' only response was a momentary silence. He stood there, peering into Shepard's dusky-blue eyes, with a burning loathing - the sides of his upper lip twitching like an angry dog preparing to bare its teeth. And suddenly, the bellicose krogan bared his teeth indeed, as he snarled and lunged forward at Shepard, grabbing him by the throat, and hoisting him up, a good three feet off the ground. In spite of having grabbed John by the neck, no attempts were made at constricting his windpipe - this was an exhibition of strength, plain and simple.

"Wellâ€|!" John said in a bit of a froggy voice, still finding it a bit difficult to talk, in his current predicament. "Hello to you too, sunshine!"

Gordon flinched in Shepard's direction, only to be reminded not to make any sudden movements, by the stiff jab of a shotgun barrel in his chest from the fog-eyed Commander.

"Nnn-Nnnâ€|" Kim dissuaded, with a rigid shake of his head.

The Normandy crew, seated along the far right wall under gunpoint, had a similar reaction to watching the plight of their intrepid leader and truest friend. But they too were suppressed by the barrels of a half a dozen aimed weapons.

"My name-" The krogan began to explain, still holding Shepard high up, above his head. "-is Weyrloc Kargasâ€|"

"Weyrlocâ€|?!"

"Yesâ€|" Kargas replied with a grin - pleased to have invoked John's fearful, wide-eyed reaction. "I see that name still carries meaning for you." He said, as Shepard's legs dangled helplessly, two-feet off the ground. "At least you don't merely dismiss those that you slaughter and kill... I am the last remaining Weyrloc, Shepard - the

one that's going to extract a slow and painful vengeance from you, for the wrongs that you've committed against me and my entire race. And especiallyâ€¦ For my Lukalaâ€¦!" He proclaimed, as he gradually began to tighten his grip around the human's throat.

"I didn't want to kill them!" John asserted in a hoarse voice, as his breathing was slowly stifled. "I tried to reach a peaceful resolution with clan Weyrloc! I appealed to your Clanspeaker! To Guld! But they wouldn't listen to reason hey left me no choice!"

"Nor do you leave me one now!" The krogan declared, as his iron-fisted grip turned into a full-on chokehold, slowly squeezing the life out of Shepard, with every diminishing breath he took.

"Hey!" Gordon shouted, as he watched his friend's lips begin to turn a dark shade of blue. He lunged forward, in an attempt to render aid, only to be shoved back again, by the deadly end of a shotgun.

"Watch it, Doctor Wannabe!" Kim remanded, raising the barrel up to the physicist's face. "Gordon Freeman might've been bulletproof, but I doubt you are!"

Shepard's eyes slowly to roll into the back of his head, as his breath seared his lungs.

"Easy, Kargas." A shrill voice offered up, with the hiss of a respirator. "Easyâ€¦ No need to be impetuousâ€¦ You wanted to savor this, remember?"

"Yes I doâ€¦" The krogan conceded with an odious grin. His grip ebbed as he lowered Shepard back down to his feet. The instant he was back to his own vertical base, before he could even take a breath, John felt the hand retract from his throat, only to have it smash into his face, in the form of a fist.

The crushing blow sent John spinning, and brought him down to his knees, with a newly opened gash, exuding blood from a purplish wound on his right cheek. "Ack! Augh!" John coughed, gagged, and respired - hunched down on the floor, as he tried to refill his lungs.

"Hehâ€¦!" Amazingly he chuckled, as soon as he could breathe again. "Eheheâ€¦! Soâ€¦" He said, as he turned back around to face the krogan. He drew one leg forward, planting his foot on the ground, and using it to rise back to his feet. "The last Weyrlocâ€¦ taking orders from a Volus..."

"Orders?!" Kargas fired back, in a bolstered tone that resonated with a hint of embarrassment. "I take orders from no one!"

"Oh come on, sure you do!" John derided, with a cynical grin. "I mean, he said it himself, right?" He questioned, tilting his head towards the volus. "He's the one who put this whole thing together."

"What the hell's he doing?!" Jacob asked, as he watched Shepard actually begin to taunt these malcontents to the point of provocation.

"What he does bestâ€¦" Garrus offered back, with an intrigued look in his eyes.

"Hey, he may have put this thing together, but he'd be nothing without the two of us!" Kim interjected with his own opinion, as he turned around to face Shepard - leaving Gordon and Cameron under the watchful eye of his peons.

"Sureâ€¦" John replied, with a dubious, condescending nod. "Hey, I'm curiousâ€¦" He continued, turning his attention to the fog-eyed officer. "How many batarians did you fight off, back during the blitz?" He asked. "You know, I've heard some crazy stories. But they couldn't possibly be true, could they?"

"The hell they weren't!" Kim proudly retorted, arrogantly puffing out his chest. "I was a legend! The best the Alliance had ever seen! Long before you came along."

"Right, rightâ€¦" Shepard agreed, in pretense, with a disingenuous nod. "Boy, I'll tell ya. I never thought I'd see the dayâ€¦ The Infamous Krait-Viper Kim, and the Warchief of Clan Weyrloc." He said, as he turned back to Kargas. "That is, technically accurate, rightâ€¦?" He asked of the krogan, sounding unsure of himself, with a puzzled eyebrow raised. "I mean, if you're the last Weyrloc, that automatically makes you Warchief, doesn't it?"

"Uhâ€¦ Yes!" Kargas quickly and eagerly acceded, after a brief stupor. "Yes, of course it does!"

John nodded. "Krait Viper Kimâ€¦ And a Krogan Warchiefâ€¦" He began again, looking back and forth between the two transgressors. "Taking orders from a volusâ€¦" He disparaged, as he looked past them, down to the snobbish Tarrik, and began clicking his tongue against the roof of his mouth. "Tskâ€¦ Tskâ€¦ Tskâ€¦ What's this galaxy coming to?"

Kargas and Kim could not resist turning to face each other, glaring with a hard stare and a condescending eye, as if trying to inform the other of their own individual superiority.

"Heheh!" Came a cavalier laugh, as Tarrik stepped forward, squeezing his way through the gap between the two scofflaws. "Shepard, do not think for one moment that I can't see what you're trying to do." He superciliously explained. "I must warn you, however, that this is an exercise in futility! Their loyalties to me are infallible." He declared, with his arms outstretched at his sides to encompass both the officer and the mercenary.

"Loyalties...?" Kim rang out, with a disapproving tone, and a brow furrowed in umbrage. "We're not your lapdogs, Tarrik. I'm just in this for the money!"

"Hmâ€¦" Shepard hummed, intrigued, as he raised a pair of skeptic eyebrows and shrugged. "Sounds pretty fallible to me, 'Captain'. You know, I'll bet-" he continued, with an amiable tone, as he looked back to the two armored transgressors. "-he's been playing you two for saps, from the getgo. Hell, I wouldn't trust this manipulative little egomaniac. Think about it; you're a threat to him. And I'm sure, as far as he's concerned, you'd both be better off deadâ€¦ Frankly, it wouldn't surprise me, one bit, if he's planning to have

you two killed, when all this is through."

Kim's pursing lips, his daunted eyes, and a sudden nervous demeanor were what immediately gave him away, as he couldn't help himself from wincing and darting his pupils rapidly, back and forth between Kargas, and the floor. Tarrik also became imbued with a newfound fidgettiness that Shepard had yet to see from this 'orchestrator of grand schemes'.

"No! You're kidding me!" John's face beamed with a dumbfounded grin, unable to believe what he was seeing. "He is, isn't he?! And you know it! He's having YOU kill HIM, isn't he?" He beckoned, in shock, as he nodded towards Kargas.

"You were going to kill me?!" The massive krogan implored, enraged, as he turned his sights from Shepard, and dedicated them fully to the fog-eyed head of security.

"No!" Kim quickly denied, with a stutter in his voice. "Well, I mean, he wanted me to!" He renounced, pointing down at Tarrik, who quickly took two backpedaling steps, with his hands up, blamelessly. "But I wasn't gonna do it! He said he'd found some rich buyer willing to pay a boatload of creds for Shepard, but that he had to be alive. And that you couldn't be trusted."

"He told me that YOU were the one that had the buyer for Shepard!" Kargas fired back, with an angry growl. "That your greed was insatiable, and that YOU couldn't be trusted!"

Just then, as the two men stood staring each other down, they turned in unison, locking their gaze upon the same target; a viper-tongued, impudent little whelp of a volus.

"You little son of a bitch!" Kim snarled, through gritted teeth, as both he and Kargas heedlessly turned their backs on Shepard and Freeman - their sights completely consumed by the backpedaling volus. "You were gonna have us kill EACH OTHER?!"

With the two men utterly distracted, Shepard quietly stepped up beside Kim, and gave the man his own back, allowing him to ever so deftly, and delicately, slip his one of his restrained hands into the Officer's left pant pocket, like a pick-pocketing sneak thief. A split second later, Shepard's hand slipped out with something pinched between two fingers.

With the guards caught up in the distraction, Shepard's slight of hand feat had gone completely unnoticed by almost everyone - with the exception of Gordon who keenly observed with his own acute eyes.

"Uh! Gentlemen, please!" Tarrik begged, with his hands helplessly raised, as he backed away from the encroaching brutes. "Don't listen to him! Can't you see what he's trying to do! He's trying to create a schism between us! Don't let him impair your better judgement!"

Taking advantage of the fact that the officers formerly guarding him were now caught up in the altercation, like betting spectators at a boxing match, Gordon took a few low-profile steps over towards Shepard.

"What did you just do?" He asked, in a low whisper.

"What? You mean about pitting them against each other?" John asked, as he fiddled with something in his hands, behind his back. "Or about picking one-eye's pocket?"

"You picked his pocket?!" Freeman exclaimed, in an over-excited whisper. "Did you get the key?!"

"No, I missed it. But I got his lighter!" He explained, as he revealed the small, silver-gleaming, rectangular object in his hands, to Gordon.

"His lighter?" Gordon pondered aloud, as his eyes began flicker back and forth, like a processing computer. "That gives me an idea!"

"I've already got a better one in mind." John cheerfully informed, with a cocksure grin, snapping Gordon out of his contemplative trance, and back to reality.

Tarrik's cowardly back-pedal finally came to a stop, when he felt his spine suddenly press up against one of the large Casino pillars, effectively leaving him cornered like a frightened rabbit, preyed upon by two ravenous wolves.

"Gentlemen, please!" He begged in a shaky, wavering voice, with his hands up and outstretched in front of him. "If you only give me a moment, I assure you I can explain everything!"

Just then, Kim hooked his arm around one of Tarrik's shoulders, while Kargas hooked the other. In cooperative effort, the two men hoisted the manipulative volus up to eye-level, leaving him dangling, with his back up against the pillar.

"I've been meaning to kill you since the moment you set foot aboard my ship." Kim disclosed, in a hushed, angry voice, as he raised his weapon and aimed it at Tarrik's masked face - a face that was surely engraved with terror, beneath. "Now's as good a time as any." He said, with a shrug. "How should we do it, Karg?"

"I hear tell that normal oxygen is highly poisonous to volus." The krogan conjectured, as he reached for one of the hoses jutting out of Tarrik's suit. "They say their flesh will actually split open, when exposed. I've always wanted to see that for myself... What say we peel him out of his little shell?"

"No! No, please!" He begged and beckoned for mercy - shaking with an uncontrollable fear. "Wait! Don't do this! You still need me!" He implored, as he felt the krogan start pulling at the sturdy, albeit far from invulnerable, seals on his suit. Just then, as he fearfully awaited the scorching burn of oxygen soon to wash over his skin, he looked up, between the human and the krogan, and watched Shepard slyly fiddling with something behind his back. "Wait, wait, wait! Stop! Look, you fools!" He directed, pointing out in a panicked fervor. "Over there! Look!"

Keeping their grips firm on the wiley volus, both Kim and Kargas turned and looked in the direction Tarrik indicated. Sure enough,

they could see Shepard clicking a small, silvery object in his hands, behind him. Tiny sparks flickered, as he was apparently trying to set fire to a set of pearly silk curtains behind him.

"Shit!" Kim exclaimed, as he released his hold on the volus, primed his weapon, and sprinted over towards Shepard. As Tarrik dropped back down to the ground, he quickly spun about, and attempted to scurry away in the opposite direction, like a wounded animal, only to be grabbed by the back of his neck, at a mighty krogan's hands, and held in place.

"Come on, come on!" Shepard whispered to himself, feigning angst, as he continued to click the lighter behind him.

"HEY!" Kim shouted out, charging in with his weapon raised and aimed at Shepard's head. John immediately froze in place, like a deer caught in the high beams.

"What're you doing?!" He demanded, as he shoved Shepard around, with the barrel of his gun. "Gimme that!" He snarled, as he reached out and confiscated the object.

"Whâ€|" Kim stuttered, as he examined the object - rotating it around between his fingers. "Where'd you get this?!" He demanded, as he stuffed his free hand into his left pocket, finding it devoid of his lighter. "This is my lighter!" He affirmed, as he stuffed it back into the pocket, and re-aimed his weapon at Shepard's head. "So was that it?! Huh?! Was that your last little 'ace in the hole'."

"Actuallyâ€|" John said, as his semblance of worry and hopelessness, suddenly began to fade, turning into a brash, brazen-faced grin. "This was just the distraction."

Shepard turned his head to look back and to his left, where Gordon had managed to creep a few feet away. He stood near one of the Casino's many tribal carved pillars, upon a small decorative elevation. The platform was outlined with large stones, and was home to an exotic bed of soil, flora, and vegetation. And at the center of the miniature oasis, was a bronze brazier, with a brightly burning flame dancing in the center, like a ritualistic pyre. Kim looked up at Gordon, and his mouth cracked open, as he watched the physicist's eyebrows bounce up twice, with the guise of a naughty child who knew he was about to do something bad. Suddenly, PANG! Gordon thrust his foot backwards, kicking the brazier as hard as he could. The large, propane fueled bowl was launched off of the small terrace, becoming a rolling fireball, as it made contact with the carpeted floor below - which immediately ignited with its touch. A streak of flames began to grow across the floor, radiating like ripples in a pond, as the onlooking crowd of blackguards and hostages exhaled a collective gasp, accompanied by shrieks of fright.

"Son of a bitch!" Kim exclaimed, as he aimed his shotgun at Gordon, who became a dark silhouette, with a wall of smoke and flames quickly rising behind him.

As his finger tightened around the trigger, he was suddenly suddenly knocked off his feet by a mighty, powerful blow. Like a bulldozer through a concrete barricade, Shepard charged with a vehement shoulder tackle, slamming Kim to the ground.

As the flames continued to grow around and consume the overturned brazier, the fuel tank hidden underneath it became superheated, until finally POW! It erupted with a small explosion, bringing with it more flame and fury, to the smoking conflagration.

The loud percussion drew the shocked, onlooking eye of every guard in the vicinity, as thick clouds of smoke began to waft up towards the ceiling. Just then, as expected, the ship's state-of-the-art fire suppression system kicked in with numerous, thick jets of fire extinguishing vapor, quickly starting to smother the flames, and shroud the entire deck with a thick, hazy smoke screen.

"That's our cue, fellas!" Garrus shouted, as he began to rise. With a flurry of nearly perfect synchronicity, he, Jacob, Mordin, Legion, and Grunt shot to their feet, and charged the barricade of distracted, disarrayed officers in front of them.

"Bastard!" Kim snarled in a rage, on his back, as he looked up at Shepard, and took aim. John shot forward, kicking away the barrel and sending the entire firearm flying out of Kim's hands. Without a single loss of motion, John immediately recovered after the first kick, and swung another, straight across the one-eyed Commander's skull, leaving him sprawled out, motionless and unconscious, across the floor.

Upon seeing this, Kargas released Tarrik, with a dismissive shove to the floor, as if he were discarding a piece of trash. His predatory eyes narrowed on Shepard, as he released a guttural growl, and charged him.

Tarrik looked around. Amidst a thunderous cacophony of panicked screams, shrieks, and gasps, he could see uniformed men being trampled and stomped into submission under the heels of Shepard's crew, as the dismal blanket of grey continued to thicken and set in. Being smart enough to know when to cut and run, he turned and began to crawl away, on his hands and knees, in a vagrant display of cowardice.

"GET BACK!" Shepard's commanding voice resonated throughout the entirety of the deck, overpowering the frightened chorus of voices, as he addressed the massive sea of innocents. "ALL OF YOU, KEEP BACK AND STAY DOWN!"

"Shepard!" He suddenly heard an angered, guttural voice call his name. As he spun around, he was met immediately with a powerful charge. John was swept off his feet, and he suddenly felt the very air being squeezed out of his lungs, as he found himself constricted within the krogan's massive arms, in a devastating bear hug.

"I will crush the very life out of you!" Kargas snarled in a hate-fueled blood rage - his arms, like jaws of death, trembling as they tightened around the puny human.

"NGGH! URGH!" Shepard grunted, in agony, as the pressure began to mount. He couldn't take a single breath, and the force made him feel as if his own head was going to pop off his shoulders, like a bottlecap flying off a shaken-up soda bottle.

John looked down into the ireful eyes of his krogan enemy. With his

hands firmly locked behind his back, both by the handcuffs, and the krogan's own titan-like grip, his options were limited. The fading Commander reeled his head back, as far as he could, and with one blistering, forceful thrust forward, CRACK! Utilizing his own forehead as a battering ram, Shepard smashed in Kargas' nose and jaw. It was perhaps reflex alone that caused Kargas to drop his human captive, and clench his face with his hands, in disarray.

"Ack! Gordon!" Shepard coughed, and called out, as he struggled to steady himself. Gordon's eyes perked up, as he quickly spotted Shepard's silhouette out, in the fog.

"The krogan!" John directed, upon noticing he had Freeman's attention.

"Right!" Gordon reciprocated, as both he and the Commander darted forward.

Kargas pried his hands off of his face. His gloves were stained with a layer of yellowish-green blood, which trickled out of his nose. Suddenly, he looked up to see two figures burst forth, from the cloudy haze - charging him with their heads lowered, like a pair of wild, dominant rams.

"RAARGH!" He and Gordon grunted in unison, as they careened hard, shoulder first, into the krogan's abdomen. Despite his armored solar plexus, the overwhelming force of the blow knocked the air out of him, as he was actually taken off his feet, and driven back. Freeman and Shepard plowed through the krogan like a freight-train through a parked car, before finally slamming him hard, back first, against one of the nearby pillars, with bone crushing force.

"UAGH!" Kargas groaned as he slid down, to the ground, in a seated position. Still dazed and reeling from the initial blow, he looked up and tried to scurry back to his feet, when a flash of red heralded the unforgiving blast of Shepard's kneed slamming straight into his face - crunching it, with a crushing blow, against the pillar. Kargas rattled like a dying beast, with his eyes rolling back into his head, as he slipped into a profound state of unconsciousness.

"That's not gonna keep him down long!" John anxiously admitted, as he futilely tried to pry his restrained arms apart behind him. "We gotta get outta these cuffs!"

36. Chapter 36: Battle for The Illustria I

****Salvation: Episode I - The Taking of the Carmenta Illustria****

Disclaimer: This fan-fiction is part of an episodic series taking place after Salvation: A Half-Life/Mass Effect Universe Fan Fiction, which will lead directly to its sequel, Salvation II: Project Prometheus. These episodes and sequel take place OUTSIDE of the Mass Effect 3 continuity. Characters property of their respective companies, Half-Life created by Valve and Mass Effect created by Bioware.

****Chapter 36: Battle for the Illustria (Part I)****

****The Fog Of War****

[ALERT! ALERT! FIRE DETECTED ON THE PROMENADE DECK.]

A red, flashing indicator informed on the bridge's primary control panel, as Leahr'Haan folded his laptop shut. He looked up at the ominous, red flashing light, as he finished gathering a few final things, seemingly in preparation for departure.

"Not my problem anymoreâ€|" He muttered to himself, with a shake of his head, as he gathered everything, and stood up. He turned around, and made for the exit, where he was promptly met by the two newly stationed guards there.

"Where do you think you're going?" One of the two human officers demanded, with a notable tone of condescension in his voice.

"I am leaving." Leahr'Haan adamantly put forth, without hesitation. "Kindly stand aside, and let me pass."

"Heh, you're not going anywhere, suit rat." The second officer chimed in, with a scoffing chuckle. "Our orders to keep an eye on you, and make sure you stay put."

"Lookâ€|" Leahr started to explain, with a sigh. "All I wanna do is get outta here. The ship is on VI auto-pilot. The course is set, and the relay coordinates are all entered in. It won't stop until it reaches and passes through the relay, no matter what. You don't need me anymore." He reasoned, with a pleading shake of his head, and shrug of his shoulders. "Please, just let me pass. I don't wanna have to kill you."

"Ahah!" The darker haired human officer exhaled a jeering laugh, as his eyes opened wide with amazement. "You - you're gonna kill us?" He asked, with a clear timbre of skepticism. "And just how you gonna do that, buckethead?"

"With this." The quarian asserted, as he held up his folded laptop. "A few minutes ago I sent a recall order to every last mech on-board this ship. They're all heading up here right now, with one standing command - kill anyone and everyone on this deck, that isn't me."

"Bullshitâ€|" The same officer refuted, in disbelief, as a sudden paleness washed over his face, removing any sense of mockery or jest. "You're bluffing!"

"See for yourselfâ€|"

Without taking his eyes off the quarian, the darker haired officer drew his weapon, and backed away towards the door. He pressed his hand against the door panel, causing it to slide open. As soon as it did, the sound was undeniableâ€| The metallic stomp of dozens of armed cybernetic soldiers converging on their location, from every hall down the way. The officer leaned out, just enough for a glimpse and any shred of doubt dissipated right then and there, as he could make out encroaching squadrons marching on, in the distance.

"Shit!" He exclaimed, as he ran back into the room, with his gun aimed at the quarian's head. "He's telling the truth. They're

comingâ€| " He informed his lighter-hair partner, coaxing him too to pull his sidearm from his hip, and aim it menacingly. "Call 'em off! Shut 'em down!"

"Of course-" Leahr'Haan calmly acknowledged. "But only after I've passed safely through that door."

"Fucking quarian!" The second, lighter haired officer snarled, with his unsteady gun starting to quiver in his hands. "Shut 'em down or we'll kill you!"

"Go ahead!" Leahr snapped back. "But I'm the only one who CAN shut 'em down. If you kill me, they'll all still be coming to kill you too."

"Mrrrâ€| " The dark-haired guard growled under his breath, as he looked back and forth between the opened door, and the quarian. Just then, he made a decision, as he lowered his weapon, and suddenly lunged towards the quarian. "Rargh, gimme that!" He snarled, as he ripped the quarian's laptop out of his hands. He rushed over to a nearby console, set the laptop down, and opened it up.

"Even if you did possess the knowledge or skill to break through my encryptions-" Leahr chimed in, as the desperate officer began aimlessly punching away at the keys, in a panicked fervor. "-which I seriously doubt you do; it would take you hours. And I doubt you have more than a few minutes. Maybe seconds, at this pointâ€| "

The amber-haired officer, who still held his weapon in Leahr's face, clenched his teeth and showcased a scornful glare. "Shut 'em down, god damn it!" He demanded, in a voice that was more piteous than it was commanding.

"You know what you have to do!" Leahr immovably insisted. "As soon as I'm out that door, I promise you I will deactivate them. But you're running out of time."

Just then, coming as a surprise to all in the room, the ceiling itself began to tremble. Leahr and the guards all raised their heads and began looking around, as a strange, rumbling sound could be heard, seemingly emanating from one of the air conditioning vents in the ceiling. This wasn't caused by the onslaught of oncoming mechs, no - though their steady approach could still be heard. This was something different. All of a sudden, a brilliant blue flash of light beamed out between the gaps of the ceiling grate, and PANG! The grate itself exploded off, onto the floor.

"What the hell?!" The darker-haired officer exclaimed, in shock, as he aimed his gun up, at the exposed, shadowy hole. "What're you doing now? What was that?!"

"Uh, th-that's not me!" Leahr affirmed, as he too looked up in congruent shock. "I-I had nothing to do with that!"

Suddenly, a pair of alabaster skinned legs swung out of the dark recess, quickly becoming the slim figure of a woman in a red dress, as she dropped out of the ceiling, landing on the bridge floor, with a light thump.

"Wellâ€| " Miranda coyly greeted, with a vain smile on her face -

steadying herself as a lavender veiled quarian woman dropped out of the hole, beside her. "Which one of you boys is gonna buy us ladies a drink, hmm?" She asked, with a pouty-lipped smirk, as she raised a brash eyebrow.

"...what the?" The dark hair officer muttered under his breath, in perplexed befuddlement, as he furrowed his brow. Before he could make any kind of sense of the situation, his flawed instincts coaxed him to give a shake of his head, as he began to turn his weapon on the two women.

"Ah-ah-ah!" Miranda brazenly refuted, shaking her own head, as her hands lit up with a brilliant cerulean flame. She cocked her arms back before immediately driving them forward, unleashing a powerful tidal wave of pure biotic energy.

"Keelah!" Leahr cried out, in a panic, as he instinctively grabbed his laptop and dove to the side, out of the shockwave's path.

The surging billow of energy swept across the floor, scooping the two human blackguards up, of their feet, with it. "Huah!" "Ugh!" The two officers grunted, as they were slammed against the unforgiving wall, with brutal, bone crushing force, like a pair of flies under a fly swatter. Their weapons dislodged, flying out of their hands, as they dropped motionlessly to the floor.

"That wasn't very gentleman-like of them." Tali cynically added, with her sub-machine gun drawn, but aimed idly at the floor.

"I must've come on too strong." Miranda playfully admitted.

Just then, like a mouse peeking out of a hole in the wall to see if it's safe, someone began to stir, from behind one of the inert consoles.

Tali's armed hand shot up, and Miranda's hands lit up, like electric conduits once more, as both aimed their arsenals in the direction of the movement.

"You!" Tali uttered, with a stunned gasp, as she looked on at the veiled and helmeted figure cowering behind the console. "You're a quarian!" She exclaimed, as she lowered her weapon, and marched over to the timid figure, in a huff. "YOU'RE behind this?!" She demanded, as she grabbed a fistful of his veil from under his chin, and dragged him to his feet.

"No, no, wait! Please, don't kill me!" He begged and pleaded, trembling in her grip, as he held two shaking hands up at his sides. "I can explain!"

"How can you-" Tali began to question, with a brooding sense of detest and disgust ringing in her voice. "-one of our own people, be involved in something like this?!"

"Tali!" Miranda's dire voice suddenly caught her attention. She turned for a corner-of-her-eye glance at the operative in the red dress, who stood leaning halfway out of the opened doorway.

"We've got in-coming!" The porcelain skinned woman supplemented, as she retreated back into the room, with her hands lit up like torches.

"Mechs, and lots of 'em!"

"How many?!"

"All of them, I think!"

"Yes!" Leahr was quick to interject, causing Tali to snap her head back towards him, with an evil glare burning through her mask. "They're all coming, and they'll kill everyone in this room that isn't me! But I can stop them! I'll shut them down if you let me go! Please!"

Tali stood silent for a moment, as the foreboding clamor of dozens of heavy-metal stomps grew louder and louder, as the legion of automatic killing machines drew closer and closer. Just then, she made a choice.

"Umph-ack!" Leahr grunted in agony, as Tali rammed her tightly balled fist into his gut, leaving him huddled over in pain, before she slammed him hard, back first, against the console which had sheltered him.

With Leahr's nullified, Tali checked her SMG, making sure it was combat ready, as she took her place, facing down the opened doorway, beside Miranda.

"What a vacation this turned out to be!" She muttered, with a groaning sigh - raising her weapon, and taking aim, as the first of many metal figures turned into the room.

POW! POW! POW!

* * *

><p>After fully smothering the flames, the thick jet's from the ship's fire suppression system had finally stopped, leaving the entire Promenade Deck saturated with an ashen, murky haze. Like a thick London Fog, an eclipsing mixture of mist and smoke blanket the room, creating a silver cloak that no naked eye could penetrate. A thousand scared voices wailed in panic and disarray, amidst a raucous of aimless gunfire.<p>

"Simmons?! Is that you?!" A disoriented officer called out, standing at the center of a cloudy world, as he watched dark silhouettes dance all around him. Friend or foe was anyone's guess. "Simmons?!" He yelled out again, as a shadowy figure disappeared into the distance. There he stood alone, frantically looking in all directions, like a lost and frightened child, in the middle of the woods. Suddenly! "UMPH!" He cried out, in pain, as he felt something plow into his spine with the force of a big rig truck, sending him crashing to the ground, face first. As he rolled over, the last thing he saw was the foot of a large, powerful turian, stomp down on his face. Just then, a flash of red! And a fade to black!

"Sorry. Not Simmons." Garrus coyly remarked, as he looked down at the felled officer. Just then, he spotted a beguiling twinkle of silver on his belt. The twinkle of a handcuff key. Garrus squatted down at the guard's side, and awkwardly began attempting to maneuver his restrained hands, so as to retrieve the liberating key. At that moment, he spotted an all too familiar orb of light, piercing the

shadowy veil, like a lighthouse over a misty shore.

"Legion!" Garrus called out, shooting back up to his feet. The amiable machine wasted no time in heeding the allied turian's call - his light growing brighter and brighter as he approached, before his full silvery aspect became visible.

"Thank the spirits for that bright face of yours!" Garrus declared, as he greeted the geth. "Listen, do you think you can get the key off of this guy?" He asked, as he looked down at the motionless aggressor. "I've got the reach, justâ€¦ Not the flexibility."

A few panels motored back and forth atop Legion's head, as he seemingly built a consensus. Just then, without any further computations, the powerful machine flung his hands apart, from behind his back - snapping the binding links in the chain, as if they were paperclips. With his hands now free, he quickly stepped around behind Garrus' as the turian's mouth dropped like a drawbridge.

"YOU MEAN TO TELL ME YOU COULD'VE DONE THAT AT ANY TIME?!" The astonished turian demanded, as he felt Legion take hold of the chain binding his cuffs together. Just then, SNAP! He felt his hands come apart, as Legion disposed of the links with ease.

"Affirmative." Legion acknowledged.

"Ughâ€¦!" Garrus groaned, with a mixture of annoyance and relief, as he drew his arms forward, massaging his wrists, and rotating and stretching his stiff, kinked shoulders. "Well then, don't just stand there, you big tin can! Go help the others!" He urged, with his finger pointed out, into the fog, as he bent down to relieve the fallen officer of the weapon laying next to him. "We gotta take back this ship! I'll go and see about setting up some sort of fortification!"

"Hey!" An eager voice suddenly yelled out, as another uniformed figure suddenly came into view.

"Hey! Hey, Mr. Vakarian! It's me, Zee!" The former Illustria Officer fervently made himself known, as he ran up to Garrus and Legion with his hands locked behind his back. "Hey, get me out of this! I'll help you guys!"

Legion looked up at Garrus for instruction, with what could only be interrupted as his version of a look of suspicion. After a brief deliberation, Garrus acquiesced, with a nod of his head. Legion quickly obliged, moving behind the ardent young turian, and breaking him free.

"Oh, thanks!" Zee gratefully bestowed, as he rubbed his sore wrists.

"Kid, listen to me!" Garrus sternly ordered, as Legion quickly turned and disappeared into to fog to render his assistance elsewhere. "Take this key." He explained, pointing down at the twinkling key on the downed officer's belt. "Find Shepard and Freeman - the two humans that came in here a while ago, the ones that started the fire - and set 'em free!"

"Got it!" Zee affirmed, as he bent down, and unhooked the key from

the sprawled out guard's belt loop. As he stood back up, key in hand, he looked around, seeing nothing but cloudy haze and obscure shadows in every direction.

"Wait, how am I supposed to find 'em in this?!" He implored.

"You'll find 'em!" Garrus yelled back, as he rushed away, disappearing into the gloom. "Just follow the screams!"

Zee sighed, shook his head, and rolled his eyes, as he turned and cut through the smog, in the opposite direction.

In the midsts of the dismal shroud, two armed, and noticeably nervous officers slowly approached each other, without even realizing it. Both guards, a turian and a salarian, warily walked in reverse, with their weapons aimed into the cloudy veil. Like something out of a horror movie, they could make out shadows and silhouettes moving in the distance, but whether the shapes were friend or foe to them was anyone's guess. Suddenly, they jumped! "Huh?!" They each shouted, spinning about, as the feel of something pressing against their backs thrilled them, and filled them with fright.

"No, wait!" The salarian was the first to cry out, as he raised his hands up, amiably. "Don't shoot! It's me! It's me!"

The turian, previously holding a trembling sidearm aimed at the salarian's heart exhaled a sigh of relief, as he lowered his weapon. "Spiritsâ€¦" He said, with a huff, as he huddled over, with one hand clutching his heart. "I thought you were one of themâ€¦!"

"No, it's just me." The salarian blackguard assured, as he took a quick look around. "But what the hell happened? I was on patrol around the promenade, and the next thing i knew, the ship's fire suppression system had kicked in."

"It was Shepard, and that other human!" The affronted turian barked, quickly growing irate, as he stood up straight, with an angry sneer. "Kicked over one of the braziers and started a fire to cover their escape. Come onâ€¦" He supplicated, with a subtle nod of his head. "They were unarmed and still cuffed. Let's go find 'em, and put a bullet in their brain pans!"

"Sounds like a planâ€¦!" The salarian agreed, with a sinister gleam in his eye.

Just then, the sudden sensation of someone watching overtook them both, as they thought they could hear footsteps approaching from the carpeted floor. The turian and salarian both turned about and raised their weapons at a new figure that had appeared in the haze.

"Hey, whoa! Whoa!" The silhouette of a tall, strapping turian beseeched, as he raised his hands up over his head, one of which was armed with a standard issue pistol. "Easy guys. Don't shoot, it's me! It's me!" He assured.

Although unable to immediately recognize the faceless figure shrouded by the fog, both officers exhaled a sigh with marked relief, as they sanguinely lowered their weapons without hesitation.

As soon as their hands were down, the figure buried in the cloud

suddenly drew his own weapon forward, and POW! POW! Two skillful shots - one for each one of their own brain pans. As they collapsed onto the floor, Garrus stepped out of the veil, smoking gun in hand. He looked down, and shook his head with a pitied look in his eye. "Well, I never said _I_ wasn't gonna shoot _YOU_." He shrugged.

Somewhere nearby, a nimble salarian dove into a somersault, after having pacified a previous target. He combat rolled to the feet of a nearby asari officer, before immediately unfolding himself into a double-heel kick, which was potently delivered straight into her chest. Following this, a third officer, a fellow salarian, charged up from behind, only to have his legs painfully taken out from under him, as the restrained prisoner swiveled himself around, on one knee, like the spinning blade of a lawnmower. The assailing captive then shot to his feet, finishing the deed with a sharp kick to his felled opponents temple and a devastating stomp to the throat.

"Hmph!" Grunt scoffed under his breath, as he looked on, while in much the same confined condition as Mordin. "Not bad, salarian." He muttered. "But let me show you how it's supposed to be done!" He panned his gaze around, as Mordin shook his head and rolled his eyes. Just then, much to his satisfaction, he spotted a trio of silhouettes mired by the fog, lost in the grip of confusion. They were identifiable as the Illustria's own security lackeys by the outline of the pistols in their hands, and the faint glimmer of gold from the badges pinned on their chests, shining through the haze.

"Mmmmmrrrrrâ€¦" He snorted and growled, like an ornery alligator, as he bowed his head. At that momentâ€¦ "I. AM. KROGAN!" His echoing warcry ripped throughout the deck, as he blitz forth, like an angry bull after a matador's cape. He blazed a clear path through smokey scene, eventually disappearing into it himself, becoming nothing more than a blotchy shadow - a blotchy shadow that immediately plowed through an assembly of officers, who went down like pins before a bowling ball.

Mordin sighed. "Barbaric and predictable!" He grumbled into a shout, as he watched Grunt's shadow chasing after the fleeing and scurrying officers who scrambled to get away, like mice from a cat. "No finesse, no fluidity! Far too crude and ungainly!"

"Solus, Doctor." He then heard a familiar metallic voice address him, from behind. When he turned around, it was no surprise to find a nearly blinding, luminescent ray shining in his face. "Are you unharmed?"

"Ah, Legion." Mordin amicably greeted, with a reassuring nod. "Yes. Quite unscathed. Though, far from soulless." He replied, tongue-in-cheek. "Have taken many lives, but saved many moreâ€¦" He grinned.

"Acknowledged." Legion replied with the usual monotonous indifference, as he made his way around, behind the salarian scientist. "Please remain stationary. We shall liberate you."

Mordin felt Legion take hold of the chains between his cuffs, and with one, powerful jerking motion, he heard the links snap, as he was suddenly able to separate his arms again.

"Ahhhâ€|" Mordin sighed, in relief, as he stretched his neck, and freely rotated his arms and shoulders. "Many thanks. Quite the alleviation."

"Did you see that, Solus?!" Grunt's bellowing voice suddenly demanded, as he returned from the fray, with several new splotches of blood staining his outfit. "Hope you were taking notes, cuz-" He paused for a moment, when he noticed both Mordin and the geth now free of their restraints. "Hey, how'd you two get free?!"

"Legion." Mordin disclosed, rubbing his wrists, where the metallic bracelets still hung. "Powerful pneumatic actuators in a geth can prove quite useful during times of contention."

"That's nothing! If he can break these brittle things, then so can I!" Grunt proudly declared, as he suddenly grit his teeth, scrunched his face into a determined grimace, and began trying to pry his arms apart. "HNNNGGHH!" He groaned and heaved, as he balled his hands into fist, and mustered every ounce of his own considerable strength, in a so far fruitless effort to separate them. "RRRRGGH!" He growled, as he continued trying to break his bonds. The very force he exerted caused him to tremble, as the metallic cuffs began to chafe his wrists, and cut down into his thick leathery skin. But it was clearly to no avail, as he watched Legion approaching, through his squinted eyes. "I don't need your help, geth!" The arrogant young krogan proclaimed, in a pained, throaty voice - refusing to give up.

"Statement rejected." Legion affirmed, as he took hold of the chain, and snapped it in twain, without a second thought or computation. Finding himself freed, Grunt turned around, and began rubbing his now emancipated wrists, as he shook his head, and stared at Legion with a look surmised of both gratitude and distaste.

"Time is limited." The flashlight-faced mech asserted. "We must operate expeditiously, and reconvene with the others." He said, as he turned his head and panned his gaze across the smog-filled room, as if being able to see right through it. Which must've been the case, as after a momentary scan of the room's layout, he turned, and marched away.

In another nearby section of the room, a salarian officer's sidearm flew across the room, after having had it kicked out of his hands. Relying purely on kicks and assailing shoulder-blocks, Jacob charged the salarian, driving him off his feet, and slamming him down to the ground. As the dizzied officer looked up, the last thing he saw was a knee drop down on him, like an anvil, as Jacob genuflected onto the inept officer's face, with an immense amount of force.

As Jacob stood back up. He took a fleeting glance down at the laid out officer to make sure he was no longer moving. But as he admired his handiwork, he never noticed a second blackguard malefactor sneakily taking aim at his back.

With Jacob caught dead in his crosshairs, his finger wrapped around the trigger, and began to tighten.

"Hyeah!" A loud scream tore throughout the deck, as a woman wrapped in a towel and sportcoat ensemble leapt forth, out of the shadowy

haze. She had somehow managed to maneuver her handcuffed hands from behind her back, to the front of her body. And utilizing a rowing motion with the cuffs themselves, she wrapped the linked chain, around the officer's wrist - tying him up, as she jammed her finger behind the trigger, blocking any possible shots.

"Ngh, what the?!" The salarian muttered as he tried to pull free, or discharge his weapon; finding his feeble attempt futile in both respects. With the salarian essential at her mercy, she cocked her right leg back, before slamming it straight into his gut, like a punter kicking a field goal.

"AUUGHH!"

Jacob spun around, alarmed, as he heard the anguished wail, only to spot Vanessa laying on the ground, with her legs crossed over a salarian guards face. She was wrenching back on his arm and shoulder, trying to hyperextend it, as the officer tried to pry her legs off his throat. "ARGH! UGH!" The salarian cried and bellowed in agony, as struggled to break free. Finding the girlish screams annoying, Vanessa raised her heel, and dropped it back down, like a hammer, onto the salarian's face, silencing him for the time being.

"Vanessa?!" Was all Jacob could verbally muster - dashing over to her, as she stood back up, and proceeded to dust herself.

"I got your six." She said to him, with a sly wink, as her eyes wandered down to his chest and below. "After all, it'd be a crime to defile such a gorgeous six." She muttered, lasciviously.

"Heh, you are one crazy ladyâ€¦!" He let out, with a laugh. "But I like that you can keep me on my feet. Maybe when we get outta here, we can-"

"Hey!" An angry shout reached their ears, cutting Jacob off, as a human guard burst out of the fog, with his weapon raised.

POW!

"Look out!" Jacob screamed, diving against Vanessa, shoving her out of harm's way, with the blunt of his shoulder, as the lone gunshot rang out. In the instant following the muzzle flash, Jacob very plainly heard the hiss of the round piercing the air, as it zoomed right by his head. Without a single wasted motion, Jacob blitzed forward, moving left to right, in a winding, serpentine motion, preventing the amateur officer to draw a lock on him.

POW! POW! "HUMPH!" The guard got off a pair of wild shots, striking nothing but the wall and floor, before grunting and expelling the air in his lungs, as a result of a hard heel kick to his chest. The inept human officer flew to the floor, as Jacob felt the tug of something on his arm, steadying him and keeping him from falling to the floor from his own inertia.

Jacob turned, and much to his delight, he was met with bejeweled eyes of amethyst, belonging to the mysteriously intriguing brunette, Vanessa.

"As much as I wish we could, maybe now isn't the best time for us to share a 'romantic moment...'. Vanessa disclosed, with an uneasy chuckle, and the glint of a mildly nervous sweat on her forehead.

"Ah-Hah!" Jacob exclaimed, triumphantly. "So you do admit, you're falling for my rugged and boyish charmsâ€|" He said, shooting a slick, and toothy grin her way, that one might swear gleamed with a twinkle.

The only response he got, however, was Vanessa suddenly and unexpectedly, pushing down on the back of his head, forcing him into a duck, as another stray bullet, from an unseen shooter, whizzed by their heads.

"Okayâ€| You may have a point." Jacob admitted, as the two stayed hunkered down low. "We'll get outta here alive first, and THEN discuss the possibility of a dateâ€|!"

Vanessa merely chuckled under her breath, as the rampant sound of hellfire blared on. Just then, from out of the haze, she noticed a single, bright beam of light bearing down on them.

"Wait, what is that?!" Vanessa beckoned, pointing at the piercing light, with a profound sense of concern in her voice.

Jacob squinted, trying to discern the source of the luminance for himself, when his eyes suddenly flew eyed, with surprise and delight. "Legion!"

"Dr. Freeman...?! Doctor Freeman, where are you?!" An anxious, blonde-haired woman cried out from the center of the haze. "Commander?! Doctor Freeman?! Is ANYONE there?! HELLO!"

"Helloâ€|" A malicious voice unexpectedly greeted from over her shoulder, as the blonde-haired reporter felt herself back up into something.

Cameron gasped, as she dashed forward, and spun herself around to face the owner of the voice. The visage of a tall turian manifested itself before her, as his masculine frame stepped out of the shadowy veil. She recognized him almost immediately, by the his swollen nose and the bleeding welt on his face, as the sleazy, covetous turian who felt her up a few minutes earlier.

"Oh noâ€|" Cameron uttered, with a fearful gasp and a gulp, as she slowly backed away, wriggling her cuffed hands around helplessly, behind her back. "Not you againâ€| Wh-what are you gonna do to meâ€|?!"

"You knowâ€|" The lusty-eyed turian began, keeping pace with her like a depraved stalker, as she backed away. "I've always loved the taste of human womenâ€|" He disclosed, as he lewdly licked his mouth. "I didn't get to finish with you earlier, and it don't look like your boyfriend Shepard's here to save you this timeâ€|!"

As the reprehensible scofflaw continued to creep upon the attractive young woman, looking to fulfill his own base desires, another Illustria Officer started to stir nearby.

"Uggghhâ€|!" The Security Commander, donned in a sturdy, armored chestplate, groaned as he sat up, off the floor. As he returned to consciousness, and his eyes re-opened to a murky, gray world, a throbbing pain shot through his jaw. He cringed a bit, as he sat upright, and gripped his jaw, shifting it from side to side, making sure it wasn't broken. That's when he noticed the two silhouettes passing by in front of him - one of which was in pursuit of the other.

"Please, justâ€| Just leave me alone!" Cameron pleaded for mercy, with her head tucked timidly between her shoulders, like a fearful child. "The truth is, Commander Shepard isn't even my- HUMPH!" She grunted, with a fury, cutting herself off as she suddenly and unexpectedly lunged forward, driving a rigid knee straight into his manhood.

"HUUNNNNNNNGGGGGGHHHHâ€|" The turian raled like a dying animal, as he crossed his eyes, and his legs, cupped the afflicted area with his hands, and dropped to his knees. "OOOH YOU FUCKING BIT-OOF!" Before he could finish spitting out the disparaging term, Cameron followed up with hardest high knee she could muster, straight into his face - shattering the bridge of his nose and finishing what Shepard started.

"Hah!" She whooped in triumph, as she watched him laxly fall over onto his back. "Not so tough now, are ya?!" Just then, she glanced down and spotted the beguiling glimmer of a silvery handcuff key on his belt. "Oooh, hmmmâ€|" She muttered to herself, as she first tried bending over forward to retrieve it. Quickly realizing this would be a fruitless attempt, she stood back up and instead turned herself around, giving her back to the officer. She awkwardly tried hunching over backwards, or squatting down, but each of these attempts proved futile, as the enticing key remained mockingly out of reach. Frustrated, Cameron plopped herself down to the floor, landing seated on her buttocks, at the motionless scoundrel's side.

"Argh, come on!" She huffed to herself, as she leaned back onto him, stretching her hands behind her, and feeling around his belt for the key. She continued to recline further and further back untilâ€| "A-ha!" She declared, as she took hold of the key, and unfastened the clasping hook with her thumb. Now, with the key loosely in her grip, began the burdensome task of finding the keyhole on her cuff. The tip of her tongue stuck, unconsciously, out of the left corner of her mouth, as she fixated on getting the key in the hole - an endeavor that culminated with a satisfying sound. Click!

"Ahhhâ€|" Cameron sighed with jubilation, as she was suddenly able to pull her arms apart, and bring them around in front of her, with the opened cuff still hanging off of her left wrist. She wasted no time in propping herself back up off the ground, and unlocking the other cuff, allowing it drop uselessly to the ground.

"Well, that wasn't so hard!" She proclaimed, pleased with herself, as she glanced back down at the recumbent miscreant. Just then, she spotted the abdicated handgun laying at the guard's side. After a momentary hesitation, she bent down to retrieve it.

"Hmphâ€|" She muttered arrogantly, as she stood back up, feeling powerful with weapon in hand. "Just call me 'Action Cam' - Oooh!" She suddenly exclaimed, with an elated realization, as she looked up

towards the ceiling, enthralled in a daydreaming state. "Wait, that was good! I like that! Cameron 'Action Cam' McClane - Your Cam on the action!" She proposed, as she waved her hand out in front of her, as if painting herself an invisible picture. "It's perfect!"

"Argh-ow!" She suddenly cringed, painfully and expectedly, as a wrenching twinge shot into her fingers, when the weapon was abruptly torn from her grip.

"I'll take that, honey." Kim nonchalantly informed, as he took possession of the weapon.

Cameron, still somewhat deluded by her own imagined prowess, turned and swung a hard, wide, open hand slap towards the armored official's face.

"ARRGH! UGH!" She cried out, in anguish, as the cyclopean Commander easily anticipated the blow, intercepting it with his own hand, and twisting the young journalist's arm behind her back in a way that human limbs were just not meant to bend. "AHH-OW! PLEASE, LET GO! LET GO!"

"Hurts, don't it?" He casually questioned, whispering in her ear, as he tucked the confiscated pistol into his pants, behind his back. Then, in turn, he drew forth his own formidable handcannon of a weapon, from the magnetic holster on his hip - the same weapon which was used to gun down Captain Ryback. "Now you're gonna stop squirming and stay as quiet as possible, or I'm gonna tear this arm off. Got it?"

Cameron turned and glared indignantly at her subuer. "Go to hell, you asshole!" She snarled, spraying his face with saliva, through her teeth, as she spoke.

Kim sighed. "Just what I'd expect from Shepard's bitch." He said, annoyed, as he wiped his cheek with his uniformed shoulder. Just then, his own expression grew into a raging, incensed sneer.

"AHHH!" Cameron cried out, in agony, as her arm was tortuously twisted back harder and further. "Oh god!" She whimpered, as her eyes glazed over, forcing two tiny droplets to drip out. At that moment, realizing it was useless to resist, Cameron stopped her futile and failing attempts at thrashing and escaping, as she felt a pistol barrel press against her temple.

"Come along, baby girl..." The insidious officer insisted, as he forcefully dragged the terrified reporter along, at his mercy. "You're gonna be my little blonde insurance policy through all this!"

37. Chapter 37: Battle For The Illustria II

****Salvation: Episode I - The Taking of the Carmenta Illustria****

Disclaimer: This fan-fiction is part of an episodic series taking place after Salvation: A Half-Life/Mass Effect Universe Fan Fiction, which will lead directly to its sequel, Salvation II: Project Prometheus. These episodes and sequel take place OUTSIDE of the Mass

Effect 3 continuity. Characters property of their respective companies, Half-Life created by Valve and Mass Effect created by Bioware.

****Chapter 37: Battle for the Illustria (Part II)****

****Antebellum****

Kim proceeded through the haze, jerking McClane along with him, as the symphony of screams and chorus of clamour continued to resonate across the deck. As he marched on, the slender outline of what appeared to be a salarian manifested itself in his path. Kim warily raised his opposite hand, aiming his weapon at the skinny visage, whilst keeping a firm and punishing grip on his captive's contorted arm. At that moment, the figure before him spun around, revealing the faint glimmer of a badge pinned on his chest.

"Toril!" Kim shouted out, upon recognizing one of his loyal lapdogs. And like a dog, whose ears just propped up at the sound of their names, the salarian turned and dashed over to his superior.

"C-commander Kim, sir!" The rattled salarian greeted, in a shaky and flustered voice, despite his marked relief to find a 'friendly' face.

"What the hell's going on here, Toril?!" The enraged enforcer demanded, looking around at the ensuing shroud of chaos and calamity. "Where are all the others?! And why haven't the air filtration fans cleared all this shit out yet?! Can't see a damned thing in here!"

"I-I I'm not sure, sir!" Toril stuttered in response. "We were stationed around the entire deck, so we're scattered all over the place. And the ship's upper-deck air filtration runs on the same system as the AC - which hasn't been working right for a few hours now. I think it's busted or something."

"Damn itâ€¦!" Kim griped, with a frustrated scowl. He stopped to take a moment of pensive meditation - a moment which Cameron abruptly tried to seize, by attempting to bolt away. "AHH! Agh-ow!" An attempt that was quickly thwarted when the keen-eyed Commander yanked her back, by her already contorted arm, and twisted it back even further, to the point of breaking it.

"Listen, blondieâ€¦!" He scolded, with a shake of his head, and a sturdy, cemented grip on her arm. "I already told you, I got no problem tearing your arm off if you don't stop fussing and keep still! Now behave yourself and let me think!" He demanded. With no other options, Cameron's rigid body stopped fighting and slouched down into a submissive state.

"Alright, listen closelyâ€¦!" Kim continued, once again addressing his salarian abettor. "We'll be passing through the relay any minute now. Soon as we do, we'll get reinforced by the slavers on the other side, when they board. But these idiots are going to get themselves killed in this mess, unless we regroupâ€¦!" He asserted, as he waved his hand out at the slowly settling fog. "Get on your radio. Call everyone back here - tell them to disengage and converge here, on the

starboard side of the deck. Use your omni-light to flag 'em over."

"Yes sir!"

On the opposite end of the ship - the port side - most of the previously captive passengers remained huddled down on the floor, clumped into one massive terrified jumble of life. They held their loved ones, and comforted each other as they peered through the settling haze with alarm and disarray. A consonance of gasps, shrieks, and whispers emerged from the agglomeration, as stray gunfire intermittently rang out, around them.

And at the front of the group, a one-man barrier stood between them, and their ensnaring aggressors.

"Hey, hold it right there!" A human officer yelled, as he spotted Shepard. The Commander turned to watch the brazen and inexperienced guard charge him headlong, like a young bull wanting to prove himself. John had enough presence of mind to time his movements just right. The instant before the corrupted official could make contact with an obvious takedown tackle attempt, Shepard sidestepped him; instead ramming a hard knee straight into his gut.

"HUAGH!" The officer grunted and gagged all at once, as he huddled over in pain. With his target primed, Shepard took a few steps back, before bolting back in, with a stiff-legged heel kick, straight into the side of the foolish guard's head. The gruesome, bone crunching blow, flipped the human like an omelette, and sent him crashing, motionlessly to the floor.

In the split second that ensued, Shepard's sharp senses picked up on the distinctive crackling sound behind him, like that of an electrical buzz from a taser. He instinctually strafed right, just as a second salarian officer behind him lunged in with a jab, lit up by his omni-taser.

Surprised that he missed, the officer took a second to realize what had happened, and regrouped. He turned to face Shepard, who seemed to bounce around on the balls of his feet a bit, like a light-footed boxer.

"Come on, then!" Shepard taunted, with a look of disdain in his eyes.

The salarian looked on with a grimace. He grit his teeth, as foolish pride overpowered logic. With the bright-blue omni-taser blazing on his hand, the salarian blitzed forth with another swing. And another. Shepard shirked left, strafed right, hopped back, and ducked down - avoiding each and every swing, with minimal effort.

The salarian turned to face Shepard, after his most recent failed attempt. "You slithery varren!" He shouted, noticeably frustrated, as the bright-blue omni-taser burned on his hand. "Take this!"

The blackguard charged forward once more, with his omni-taser out in front, intent on shocking the wily Commander into submission. When the salarian came at him, Shepard dropped down to the ground, placing one foot across his opponent's ankle, whilst locking his other behind

his calf - using the combination to trip him and drive him, face first, to the ground.

"Huagh!" The salarian grunted, as he kissed floor, which despite being carpeted, was more unforgiving than one would think. Shepard, on the other hand, had already scrambled back to his feet. He bolted towards the salarian's head, dropping the full weight of his genuflecting knee onto the back of his skull, with a crushing blow, leaving him silent and inanimate.

As John stood back up, he heard an unfamiliar voice call his name. "Hey, Shepard!" He spun around to see another turian member of the security team standing about three yards away, with a gun aimed straight at his heart. He was close enough to shoot with deadly accuracy at a moment's notice, yet too far for Shepard to close the gap, and avoid any fatal blows.

"Looks like I got you dead to rights!" The brash officer declared, with an arrogant smirk. "I kinda hate to kill youâ€¦ Seeing as you saved all our lives, and whatnotâ€¦ But just think of the reputation I'll get as the man who killed Commander Shep-Uagh!" He grunted in pain, after being rammed from behind, by something charging him out of the fog, effectively ending his little harangue. Trying to maintain his balance, he stumbled forward, like an inebriated malcontent, straight into Shepard's awaiting midsts. He never even knew what hit him, as John kicked his legs out from under him, before finishing the deed with a hard, blood-curdling stomp across his throat.

With this one quieted, Shepard looked up to see the dark silhouette of the cuffed man that aided him - a cuffed man with a brilliant luminescent ribbon of light painted across his eyes.

"Gordon. There you are. " He acknowledged, as the shrouded physicist stepped out of the haze. "Where'd you disappear to?"

"Was off dealing with a few of these clowns myselfâ€¦" Gordon replied, as he turned and peered into the smog. "They're about as bright as black holes, and twice as denseâ€¦ Plus, it's easy to surprise someone when you can see them, but they can't see youâ€¦"

"You can see through all thisâ€¦?"

"I can see everythingâ€¦" Gordon affirmed, in a deadpan tone. Unlike Shepard, whose visibility was limited to the few feet immediately in front of him, Gordon's vision was drastically enhanced by the tactical visor over his eyes, which gave him an infrared picture of the entire landscape, with crystal clarity. And it wasn't hard to differentiate the aggressors from the denizens, as most of the ruffians were carrying weapons.

"I think they're running awayâ€¦" Gordon conjectured, as he watched most, if not all of them, scrambling to get to the starboard side of the ship, near the entrance they used to come in. "They all seem to be leaving in a hurry." He said, as he continued to pan his gaze around towards Shepard's direction, like a slow-moving security camera scoping the landscape.

"They're probably regrouping." The Commander speculated, as his

infrared visage came into Gordon's field of view, along with another figure frantically approaching John's backside, with something clutched in his outstretched hand. "It'd make sense for them to-"

"Shepard, look out!" Gordon shouted. "Behind you!"

The Commander glanced over his shoulder, just in the nick of time to see one of the younger members of the Illustria's Security Force - a turian with medium light skin and twin dark-blue stripes marking the areas around his eyes - running up to him.

"Hey, Commander Shepard!" The eager young turian called out to John, who kept his back to the officer pretending not to have noticed him. "I'm glad I fou-Humph!" He coughed and grunted all at once, suddenly having had the wind kicked out of him, as the Commander back kicked him in the gut, like a bucking mule.

"Ack-humph! Huagh!" The young turian sputtered and coughed, hunkered down over his own stomach, as he turned around, gasping for air to replace the supply that had been knocked out of his lungs. The next thing he knew, he was staring at the bright ceiling lights, as his knees buckled, and a sharp pain drilled into the back of his legs.

"Wa-huack! Wa-ait!" He tried to sputter out an unsuccessful plea, before he felt a heavy foot press down on his throat, quickly cutting off the rest of his oxygen supply, as his lights began to dim. He gasped, as his eyes slowly started to roll back into his skull. With no other means of communicating, he held his left hand up, whilst his right tried to pry the Commander's foot off his neck. He waved his left hand about, and twinkling at the end was a small, silvery key was pinched between his fingertips.

"Oh, I'll take that." Gordon said, as he turned around, and snatched the key out of fading turian's flailing hand. He then, immediately, went to work, trying to straighten it out in his hand, and find the hole on the cuffs.

"Thanks." Shepard bestowed sarcastically, as he shifted the point of pressure he was applying from the front of his throat, to the side of his neck, in order to restrict blood flow, rather than oxygen. "Now relax! Time to go to sleep."

The young turian laid on his side, still futilely trying to pull Shepard's powerful foot off his neck. But as his vision started to blur and go dark, his strength completely ebbed, and his grip slipped off of Shepard's ankle. At that moment

"Shepard!" A familiar voice rang out, as Garrus suddenly came running up to them, bursting in from the gloom. "Shepard, stop! Let him up! He's not one of them!"

"...What?!"

"LET HIM UP!" Garrus screeched again, with a pressing sense of alarm in his voice.

Without a second thought, John immediately pulled his foot off of the fading young turian's neck.

"Ack! Augh-auck!" Zee sputtered and coughed, as he writhed around on the floor. Like the lights in a dark room suddenly coming back on, his vision came back into focus, and he gasped furiously for the air he had previously lost.

"Easy, kid. Take it easyâ€|" Garrus said, squatting down next to Zee, and rapping him on the back as he sat him up to alleviate his coughing and gasping. "You alrightâ€|?"

"Ye-ack-aughâ€| Ye-ahâ€|" He said - his throat sore and hoarse, and his head suddenly throbbing. "Yeah, I'll be fineâ€| Ughâ€|"

"Garrus, you know this guy?!" Shepard questioned, befuddled, just as there came the clicking sound of Gordon's cuffs unlocking.

"Sort ofâ€|" Garrus uttered, with a bit of an ambivalent stance, as he stood back up, helping the young officer to his feet, along with him. "His name's Zdrawkow. He's not one of 'em Shepard. He's a good kidâ€| I'll vouch for him."

"That's right!" Zee adamantly proclaimed, in a creaky froggy voice, as he rubbed his neck with his eyes still clenched half shut. "I got nothing to do with these assholes! Hell, this was only my first week on the job. How was I supposed to know they were planning to hijack the darn ship! They cuffed me and threw me in here along with everybody elseâ€|" He explained to the human Commander, as he hunched back down and cringed, clearly still in pain. "Garrus is the one that told me to come find and unlock you guysâ€|"

"Ohâ€|" John replied, with a look of instant regret, and embarrassment, as he felt Gordon suddenly unlock his cuffs behind his back. "Thanks, Gordonâ€|" He subtly said back, over his shoulder, before looking back at the youthful turian. "Well, look I'm sorry, but with every last security guard on this ship trying to kill us, I just assumed you were one of themâ€|"

"It's fine, I get itâ€|" He absolved, still hunkered over, with his arm clutching his stomach. "But damnâ€|! Feels like I got hit by a Tomkah!"

"Suck it up, kid. You're toughâ€|" Garrus encouraged, as he patted the former Illustria Officer on the back. "Come onâ€| No room for wimps, at C-Sec."

Zee inhaled, and stood back. Despite the pain he was feeling, he nodded his head, jutted his chin out, and puffed up his chest.

"Yes sir!" He declared, with a salute to Garrus. The scarred elder turian grinned, and reciprocated a more subtle salute.

At that moment, a brilliant orb of light appeared to them - cutting through the haze like the headlamp of a locomotive through a dark tunnel. It became evident, before long, that this gleaming ray of light was attached to the shadowy outline of a geth, and was accompanied by an approaching horizon of obscured figures at his side.

"Legion! Mordin! There you guys are!" Shepard declared, when the visage of his liberated crew finally became visible in the slowly

settling smoke. "Grunt, Jacobâ€¦| Are all of you alright?"

"Entirely unharmed, Shepard." Mordin was the first to reply in a cheery voice, that was tempered with obvious frustration. "Though admittedly vexed at outcome of supposed holidayâ€¦| Still. Must admit - your powers of persuasion never fail to astound! Impressive, the way you coaxed those three into altercation."

"I'll sayâ€¦|!" Jacob supplemented, with a hearty chuckle. "You might be more dangerous in a debate than you are in a firefight, Shepard."

"Alright, listen upâ€¦|!" The Commander responded, quick to seize control of the situation, with no time for levity. "Seems like the rogue security team responsible for all this is retreating to the opposite end of the deck." He said, pointing a hand out towards his right. "No doubt to regroup. The guy leading them - Krait Viper Kim - he's ex-alliance. He's bad newsâ€¦|" He informed, with a somber, almost worried tone in his voice. "No way he's going to give up without a fight, that much I can pretty much guaranteeâ€¦| Therefore, our first priority has got to be to keep these people safe." He pointedly declared, as he turned to the quivering mass of life, still huddled frightened on the floor behind them. "We keep them here, keep them down, and keep them safe!"

"Nowâ€¦|" He began again, as he turned back to his crew, who was already diligently at work checking the firing status and ammo supplies of the weapons they'd managed to commandeer. "I spotted a lot of tables and slot machines, and such when we came in." Shepard said, as he looked around to his sides, peering into the slowly fading fog, towards the various shops and eateries that had been packed with debris from the casino floor. "We need to gather some of that and try to create some sort of makeshift defensive moundâ€¦|"

As he turned to look back at his crew, he spotted, for the first time, a peculiar woman he hadn't previously noticed. She had long black hair, which was frazzled and beset upon by knots and caked-in clumps of dried shampoo. Her lilac eyes seemed to shimmer like iridescent pearl, and most bizarre of all, she was barefooted; wrapped in nothing more than a cushy bath towel, and an oversized tan sports coat.

"Ma'am!" Shepard bellowed at her, when he spotted her glancing around the room, like a wary zebra in the bush. "MA'AM!" John commanded again, this time coaxing her attention.

Vanessa turned to look at the battered, bruised, and bloodied Commander. "Who... Me?" She asked, as she pointed her index finger into her own chest.

"I'm gonna need you to please stay back, and have a seat with everyone else." Shepard sternly ordered.

Vanessa's eyes split open wide, as she exhaled an exasperated scoff. "...Excuse me?"

"Actually, Shepardâ€¦|" Jacob tried to interject just then. "This is uh-"

"Look, you're in the way!" Shepard barked angrily, as he marched over

to the towel robed woman and hooked her by the arm. "I said, get to safety! You can get hur-Argh!" He suddenly groaned in pain, as he felt the hand that he hooked around Vanessa's arm get twisted. Vanessa took hold of his hand, wrenching it into an ulnar wrist lock, the same way one might crank the throttle on a motorcycle, with a considerable amount of force.

"Son of a-!" Shepard snarled through his teeth, as he glared up at woman with eyes of amethyst. "Lady, if you don't let go of my hand, right now-

"Listen, Commander!" Vanessa snapped back, cutting Shepard off before he could present his ultimatum, as she released her hold on his hand - pushing it aside, as if she were discarding a used tissue paper. "Sorry for the discomfort, but we haven't been properly introduced!" She said.

Shepard clenched his now free hand into a fist, as he looked upon the strangely dressed, and obviously dangerous woman, with belligerence and distrust.

"The name's Vanessa Masters!" She proceeded, this time extending an open-palmed hand, for a friendly shake. "Business magnate, CEO, krav maga expert, and all around Femme Fatale!" At your service."

"Don't worry Shepard, she's with us. She's a friend!" Jacob interceded, on Masters' behalf, with a somewhat apologetic tone in his voice, and a contrite look on his face. "And I'm finding she's full of surprises!" He declared, as he turned his beguiled eyes to her once more.

"So I see!" John responded, with a voice still mired by suspicions. He looked down at Vanessa's still extended hand, and raised the pistol in his own. "Alright..." He muttered under his breath, as he shuffled the weapon around in his grip, so as to take a hold of the barrel end. "You ever handle a gun before, Ms. Masters?" He asked, as he placed the weapon into her hand, in lieu of a handshake.

"You ever try closing a multi-billion credit deal, on Illium, without one, Mr. Shepard?" Vanessa snapped back, with a cocky grin, as she took hold of the weapon, and flicked the safety off.

"Hey, wait a minute Shepard!" Garrus' voice suddenly chimed in, as John bent down to retrieve another handgun, off the floor, formerly pertaining to the salarian officer he had felled. "Where're Tali and Miranda? They aren't with you?"

"We had no choice but to split up." The Commander acknowledged, with a brooding sense of angst in his voice, mirroring the anxiety etched on Gordon's face. "The ship's headed straight for the Terminus. And there's an army of slavers waiting for us just on the other side of the relay."

"Hmm, most troubling..." Mordin offered up, with a pensive hum, as he crossed one arm, and tapped a curled finger against his chin. "A batarian raiding party will be sizeable, and well armed. A grievous tactical advantage, to be certain... Odds overwhelming. cursory evaluation suggests we'd be overrun in a matter of minutes.

"I know, Mordin." John answered back, with a swelling sense of

resolve on his face, and in his eyes. "That's why we had to split upâ€¦ If everything's going as we planned; by now the girls have seized control of the bridge, and Tali's working on stopping the ship before we hit the relay."

* * *

><p>The blare of gunfire and the clanking of metal was all that could be heard, as the brilliant flash from Tali's submachine gun continually lit up the bridge, like a strobe light in a nightclub. One after another, the loki mechs fell at her and Miranda's feet, as they mindlessly poured through the bridge door, like rats out of a bag. Their mangled bodies of twisted metal started to pile into a scrap heap at the door, but there was clearly no stopping these machines.<p>

"HALT. RELINQUISH YOUR WEAPONS AND PREP-" was the furthest that any of the piling in mechs would get, with their mandates, before being obliterated into shards of debris, and bits of smoking circuitry.

"Save your ammo, Tali!" Miranda insisted, with her hands clenched into fists, at her sides, glowing like indigo torches. "I've got a new amp I've been itching to try out!"

Just then, the flickering flame engulfing her hands intensified, as she slowly reeled her arms back, before thrusting them forwards, with her palms open; unleashing a fury of biotic energy. A blue tidal wave swept across the floor, slamming into the herd of mechanical cattle, subsequently flattening them against the rear wall, leaving it battered and dented.

Her impressive show of power did little to deter the onslaught, however, as the wrecked and ravaged parts of the fallen automatons were trampled when more and more continued to pour in, in seemingly infinite numbers.

Miranda raised an open-palmed ignited hand out, towards the mech at the fore, wrapping him tightly in a shimmering blue envelope. She then balled her hand, into a fist, which crushed the LOKI like an empty aluminum can, in a sturdy grip. Its legs and arms were compressed back into its body - and its once humanoid form turned into a barely recognizable oblong, metallic torso. It was as if it had been sent through a trash compactor. With the crushed mess still floating amidst the biotic cocoon, Miranda pulled in her arm, before immediately swinging it outward, like a pitcher at the plate. The crushed mass was sent flying back, into an agglomeration of encroaching mechs, like a bowling ball through a set of pins. Rather than knocking these mechanical pins down, however, they were utterly destroyed by the missile-like impact. One's torso was actually ripped clean off its stilted legs, which were left standing alone, before collapsing under their own weight.

With this cluster taken care of, the thought of giving herself a moment to breathe crossed Miranda's mind. A notion that was quickly slain, however, as the metal monstrosities continued to pour in, with no apparent end in sight.

Miranda's lip twitched with a snarl, as she threw forth her hands once more, engulfing the five machines, in the immediate vicinity, in

individual biotic bubbles. With them trapped in biotic suspension, she jerked her hands up, before flinging them back down, only to thrust them back up again, with the guise of an impassioned conductor presiding over an orchestra. Her motions resulted in the enveloped mechs being slammed up and down, back and forth, between floor and ceiling - quickly dismantling them, into nothingness.

Miranda's breathing began to quicken, and grow labored, as a single bead of sweat rolled out from under her hairline, tickling the side of her temple. As the relentless barrage of machines continued to pile in, like a spreading wildfire across a droughted plain, Miranda began to realize; even with the new amp she wore, this would no doubt get very exhausting very quicklyâ€|

Tali - anticipating that this deluge of cybernetic aggression would be too much for Miranda to handle on her own - ejected a smoking and depleted thermal clip from her SMG and replaced it with one of only two left on her belt. Meanwhile, a cowering male quarian, in a burgundy faceplate, peeked his head up, from behind a far console which he had timidly sought refuge behind. He was now left with a dilemmaâ€| There was only one way out of the room, and it was being blocked by a horde of his own mechs. Oh, he could stop the attack with a few simple keystrokes. But would they let him go? Would they understand the position he was in? Would they see that HE was the victim? These two daring and combative women could utterly tear him apart, and grind him into a fine powder, if they so wishedâ€| That's when a second possibility came to mind. Maybe - no - hopefully, his mechs would winâ€|

* * *

><p>The shroud of gray within the promenade deck had finally begun to lift away, revealing the vast, barren floor, amidst a still lingering mist, where gambling tables and gaming machines once stood. Visibility was still limited, as the hazy blanket regressed, but at least the room was no longer an obscured, grey abyss. Gunfire had ceased for the time being, and the massive, arena sized room, had been split down the middle. The floor may as well have been an open field on a battleground - no man's land in trench warfare - as Kim and his men gathered to seek refuge on one end of the deck, whilst Shepard and his crew had secured the hostages on the other.<p>

"Hey!" Garrus called out, as he hoisted up one end of a downed quasar machine. "Someone give me a hand with his!"

"I got it!" Gordon responded, as he quickly swooped in, to lift up the other end of the machine. "Hnghâ€|!" He groaned a little from his aching body, as he hauled up the machine, and two quickly began shuffling it towards the agglomerated mass of humanity, like a pair of movers transporting a couch.

"Freeman, what have you two been doingâ€|?" Garrus queried, as he observed the fresh cuts and bruises on top of old ones, on Freeman's face - which were akin to the ones he'd seen on Shepard.

"Ohâ€| You knowâ€|" He replied in a labored, straining voice, as they reached a suitable spot, and set the machine down. "Crawling through vents, crossing giant fans, getting beat up, and shot atâ€| The usualâ€|" He hunkered down, over his knees, as he took a breath -

realizing for the first time, how exhausted he was. "You know?" He began, between breaths. "Is it too much to ask to go somewhere without having aliens, and monsters or soldiers and mercenaries trying to kill me!?"

"Well, you joined Shepard's team, didn't you?!" Garrus asked, with a cynical chuckle.

"Yeah."

"Then that's never gonna happen." The turian replied with a smirk, to which Gordon just laughed, sighed, and shook his head.

The quasar machine they had set down, had now become part of a mounting, makeshift barrier that was being thrown together by the various members of Shepard's crew. A protective separator between the once captive legion of hostages, and the aggressors who stood amassing on the opposite side. Mordin, Jacob, Legion, and Grunt all toiled, tirelessly dragging chairs and couches, restaurant tables, gaming tables and casino machines into the aggregate mass. They were joined by the young turian officer; Zdrawkoh Ykupets, who rolled a small, rounded restaurant table into place, with its legs facing outward - and by Vanessa Masters, the towel enrobed SS-N CEO, who was helping the strapping object of her intrigue, Jacob, cart a broken roulette table across the room. Behind the sound of their drudgery, was a growing rumble of frightened, stirring voices, building to an apex, from the panicked crowd.

"We should get out of here!" A candied turian, in a flamboyant silk shirt asserted, as he stood up, from his place on the floor. "We should all be heading for the escape pods!"

"That's right! Those ruffians will be back over here any minute!" "We should leave now while they're distracted!" "You can't let them hurt us!" "You're here to save us, right?!"

The voices coalesced together, piling into Shepard's ear as one big panicked ruckus.

"People, calm down! Listen to me!" He pleaded, standing at the head of the crowd, with his hands raised up and out, like a reverend presiding over his congregation. "We're going to get you all out of here, but you have to stay calm, and be patient! I know you've all been through a lot, but panicking will only make things worse. Please!" He implored, actually inciting the feverish rabble to die down. "I'm going to need all of you to stay down on the ground, as low as you can. Lie down if you must. And no matter what happens, don't get up until we give the all clear! So please!" He insisted, gradually lowering his hands with a gesture that instructed the crowd to do the same.

"Commander!" A familiar voice, accented with a powerful scottish cadence called out, as a few familiar faces emerged from the crowd. "How can we help?!" Kenneth Donnelly, one of the Normandy's primary engineers questioned, as he stepped up and saluted their battle scarred Commander.

"Yeah, whaddaya need, Shepard?!" Gabby Daniels, his inseparable second half eagerly supplemented with a stout-hearted salute. "Daniels and Donnelly reporting for duty!"

Besides them, a few other members of the crew began to get up and step forward, as a show of willingness to offer their help, including Joker, Mess Sergeant Gardner, and Dr. Karin Chakwas.

"Just keep these people calm!" He instructed, as his amassing crew members huddled around him. "We can't keep them safe if they start running around in a panic."

"Right!" Kenneth pointedly acknowledged, without hesitation, as he and the other members of his crew fanned out, across the turbulent agglomeration, like a squad of riot police trying to keep the populace in check.

"Shepard!" Dr. Chakwas called out, as she moved in to examine a bandaged wound on his shoulder. "You're hurt!" She worriedly declared, after also spotting the wound on his calf, beneath his torn pant leg. "You've been shot?"

"It's fine, Doctor." John indifferently dismissed, as he turned and peered across the deck, looking to the small army of renegade security troops materializing on the other side, through the stubborn haze. "Already been patched up."

Refusing to take his word for it, Chakwas clutched his arm, just above his elbow, and moved in for a closer look - examining the tended wound, and the layered bandages with a scrutinizing eye. The bandages, and the flesh around them appeared clean, they were snugly fitted, though not tight enough to restrict circulation, and there was no sign of permeating blood, or bleeding.

"This is a good field dressing." Chakwas admitted, impressed. "Who did it?"

"Tali did! I found out today, she can be quite the little nurse if she needs to be, heh." He said, with a chuckle. "I'm fine, doc. Really. Just help keep these people back, and when the shooting starts again! keep your head down."

"After what we've been through with the Reapers, I still consider this a vacation!" She replied, sarcastically. "Do me a favor and save us already, would you Commander?"

"...Hmph." He chuckled mildly, under his breath, as Chakwas turned, and retreated towards the crowd.

"Hey, John!" Another voice suddenly addressed him, from his right side. Shepard turned to find Gordon approaching. "We've got all this junk setup for defense!" He informed, waving his hand over the far stretching hedge of refuse, which took the guise of a sandbag mound on a battlefield. "So long as these people keep their heads down, it should provide them adequate cover!"

"Good." Shepard quickly approved, as he looked out at the mass of blue and gold uniforms on the opposite side of the deck. "Then it's time to give them the ultimatum!"

"Hey John, wait a minute!" Gordon chimed in again, as he looked around in all directions, and sifted through the crowd of frightened patrons with his eyes. "I just realized! I haven't seen Ms. McClane

since we came in hereâ€¦!"

As the Commander raised a perplexed and concerned eyebrow when he too realized the blundersome, and somewhat obnoxious reporter had not been seen for some time, a panicked turian ranted at the center of a gathered mass of huddled officers, on the opposite side of the deck.

"This is crazy!" He exclaimed, in a fevered pitch, as he waved a sharp finger at his milky-eyed Commander. "You said we'd be rich, but you never said anything about having to fight Commandos! You're gonna get us all killed!"

"Yeah!" "That's right!" A few voices murmured, echoing with the same general consensus, from the other officers.

"Tylanâ€¦!" The bitter-faced Commander Kim hissed back, with a nose wrinkled in rage, and a seething sneer on his face, as he held a firm, burly arm wrapped around Cameron's chest and shoulders. "You've got a lot of brass standing there, saying I'M the one that's gonna get you killedâ€¦!" He snarled. "You were the one that knew Shepard was on this ship, and didn't report it until AFTER we fucking seized it, you little shit!"

"YES, I screwed up, sir... I'm sorry!" Tylan snapped back, without a tinge of genuine apology in his voice. "But this has gotten WAY out of handâ€¦! Those guys over there are gonna kill us!" He declared, pointing his hand out, towards the opposite end of the deck, where a few frantic figures could be seen scurrying around, in a fevered frenzy. "I don't wanna die here. I'd rather turn myself in and do time!"

"No one's turning themselves in, and no one's gonna do time!" Kim asserted with the utmost conviction. "Any of you back out on me now, and I'll shoot you myself!" He assured. "Now what you all don't realize, is that we've got all the leverage we'll need against Shepard, right here." He doubtlessly affirmed, as he tightened his grasp around Cameron, and shook her a bit. "This lil' blonde-haired, tight-assed, pair of tits is Shepard's girlfriend. Or should I call you his fiancÃ©eâ€¦?" He asked; the heat from his foul words washing over her ear and face, like the breath of a panting dog.

"Neither, you stupid lunatic!" Cameron rebutted, with her hands perpetually hooked, and hanging from the forearm he held wrapped around her. "I hate to break it to you, but I'm not his girlfriend! He only said I was so you wouldn't get suspicious. His real girlfriend's still out there!"

"Bullshit!"

"Oh, yeahâ€¦!?" She scoffed, with a chuckle mired by a whimper. "I'd never even met Shepard until two days ago! And he wasn't exactly fond of me, from the start... He can't even remember my name, for pete's sake!" She frantically exclaimed - trembling in his arms, with her teeth chattering. "His real girlfriend is a quarian."

"You're bluffing!" Kim roared, as he rattled her violently. "Why the hell would Shepard want some suit-rat quarian he could barely even touch, let alone fuck. Noâ€¦!" He refused to accept. "You're just trying to save your own assâ€¦!"

Cameron struggled a bit. It wasn't so much an effort to get away, as it was just a reflex. She found this man revolting and repugnant - the lowest form of human trash imaginable. Every moment she spent, under his touch, hearing his voice, and feeling his breath on the back of her neck brought her turmoil and disgust, and made her skin crawl.

"Fine!" She acquiesced, as she settled in place. "If you don't believe me, then maybe you'll believe that engagement ring you took from Shepard!" She proposed. "I'm sure you still have it, you lousy thief!"

"The engagement ringâ€|?" Kim answered back, perplexed. "What do you mean?!"

Cam scoffed and sneered. "Ever seen how thick quarian fingers are?" She replied, annoyed. "I'll bet 100 creds that ring in your pocket wouldn't fit any HUMAN woman under 400 pounds."

Kim was silent for a moment - his scarred brow furrowed with contemplation. Just then, his already vice-like grip around the young reporter's shoulders tightened, as he holstered his pistol, and shoved his hand into his pocket. After a moment of digging around, he pulled out the black velvety box, and flipped the lid open, with his thumb. At first glance, it was a normal, albeit quite stunning, engagement ring. A setting comprised of the milky way itself, with planets and stars as diamonds. But the whole thing was nestled in a mother-of-pearl silk bedding, which obscured the band from sight. With a narrow eyed glare, he maneuvered his fingers off of the box, and onto the ring itself, pinching the setting between his thumb and index fingers. With his middle finger and pinkie, he then shoved the box off - leaving only the ring itself in his hands, and revealing the truth, as the empty ring box fell onto the floor. His face went pale...

"There, you see!" Cameron berated, as she held up her alabaster hand, to show off a row of dainty, delicate, feminine fingers. "Does that look like it would ever fit me?! Are you satisfied now?! I'm not Shepard's girlfriend!"

"If it isn't you, then where's his real girlfriend?! Where is she?!" He demanded to know, as he palmed the ring in his fist, and stuffed it back in his pocket."

"Yeah, wouldn't you like to knowâ€|" Cam snickered, in a quivering, shaking voice - her whole body trembling with fear, as her eyes flooded over with tears, forcing twin streams to pour down her cheeks. "I'm not telling you anything! You're just gonna kill me anyway, especially now that I'm useless to you as a hostage... So go ahead! Do it already!" She cried, as she clenched her tearful eyes shut. "Kill me you damn psycho, and be done with it!"

"Awwâ€|" Came a disingenuous whisper in her ear. "No, no, baby girl - you've got it all wrong." He gingerly assured. "You're not uselessâ€| See, a man with a mind like mine, can find plenty of ways to use a woman with a body like yoursâ€| And I'm gonna keep you right here, as CLOSE AS POSSIBLE." He lewdly snarled, through clenched teeth, as he spooned his pelvis against her hips, tightly - forcing her to quiver and weep in silence.

38. Chapter 38: Battle For The Illustria III

****Salvation: Episode I - The Taking of the Carmenta Illustria****

Disclaimer: This fan-fiction is part of an episodic series taking place after Salvation: A Half-Life/Mass Effect Universe Fan Fiction, which will lead directly to its sequel, Salvation II: Project Prometheus. These episodes and sequel take place OUTSIDE of the Mass Effect 3 continuity. Characters property of their respective companies, Half-Life created by Valve and Mass Effect created by Bioware.

****Chapter 38: Battle for the Illustria (Part III)****

****Relay Imminent****

"Attention, Illustria Security!" A deep, commanding voice suddenly resonated throughout the cavernous deck, from the other side. "This is Commander John Shepard!" The voice declared, as the officers all turned to face its omnipotent source. "By the authority of the Alliance Navy and the Council Spectres, I hereby order you to drop your weapons and surrender peacefully!"

A sour taste grew in Kim's mouth, as he scowled, and rolled his eye. He released a heavy breath, exhaling through his nose like an angry bull, as he turned to the closest guard near him - a beige-skinned salarian, mottled with dark brown flecks.

"Here, hold this!" Kim demanded, as he gave Cameron a hard, and unexpected shove, into the salarian's arms. The push probably caught the salarian more off guard, than it had Cameron, as his eyes opened wide when he tried to get a grip on her. As Cameron regained her equilibrium, she saw this as the perfect opportunity to flee! Breaking free from the stunned salarian's flaccid grip, she bolted away, towards the promised land on the opposite end of the deck, only to feel herself get anchored down by her wrist. She looked back at what had caught her, and of course, it was the deplorable, detestable, one-eyed malcontent - holding her wrist in his talon-like hand.

SLAP! The pop of flesh on flesh echoed throughout the deck, as Cameron fired back with the hardest shot she'd ever delivered, straight across the bronze-skinned Commander's already scarred face, turning his head to the side. Somehow, he seem unfazed by the blow, as his cemented grip around her wrist didn't ebb in the slightest. As he turned to look back up at her, a small trickle of blood oozed from his lip, showing that he was human after all - at least physically. What inhumanities fermented in his heart and soul would remain to be seen however, as he reeled her in hard, towards his chest, only to deliver a barbaric, bare-knuckled, back-handed blast into her face.

"AGH!" Cameron screeched in pain, as she was sent crashing to the floor, dazed and in agony, but still conscious.

She writhed helplessly on the floor, with her hands covering her stinging face, when she felt something hook her shoulder and drag her

limp weight back up to her feet.

"Hold her, damn it!" Kim snarled through gritted teeth at the salarian, as he handed Cam's arm to him, as if he were passing a bag of groceries. "She gets away from you again, I'll kill you!"

"Y-ye-yes sir!" The salarian acknowledged as he took a firm hold of the enfeebled McClane, who was barely able to stand on her own two legs.

The cyclopean head of security made his way through the throng of his own men, who parted the path for the him, as he made way to the front.

"I want an answer, Illustria Security!" Commander Shepard's resonant voice demanded once more. "Lay down your weapons and surrender quietly, or we will be forced to respond with deadly intent!"

"YOU THINK I'M AFRAID OF YOU, SHEPARD!?" Kim howled like a madman, as he unsheathed his weapon.

Across the vast, open floor stood the intimidating spectre of several armed figures - intrepid and undaunted - behind a wall of debris that reached their waists. There were nine of them, in total; standing in a row, like the front line of a marching battalion, with the recognizable visage of Savior of the Citadel standing at the center.

"I AIN'T AFRAID OF YOU!" Kim hollered again, as he raised his weapon up to eye level. "YOU WANT AN ANSWER?!" He demanded, as he turned a holographic selector switch. There was a copious selection of apparent firing modes on the weapon, but the one he landed on was Auto-Fire. "HERE'S MY ANSWER!" He shouted, as he raised his prized, custom sidearm, aimed it out across the deck, and pulled back on the trigger.

The Ratatat of automatic gunfire blared throughout the deck, forcing the line of defenders to hit the deck, so to speak. Shepard, Freeman, Garrus, Mordin, Grunt, Legion, Jacob, Vanessa, and Zee all dove down to the sheltering haven of their makeshift defensive mound, as a violent barrage of rounds riddled it.

As Kim watched them recede to safety, he lifted his finger off the trigger for a moment, and turned back to face his band of ne'er do wells.

"What the hell are rest of you waiting for? An invitation?!" He demanded, with his weapon still drawn and aimed out. "Come on! Shoot! Shoot!"

Under his tyrannical spell, his own personal army suddenly snapped themselves out of their slack jawed, gawking trance, unsheathed their weapons, lined up beside their superior, and let loose a torrent of hellfire.

"Are they crazy AND stupid!?" Jacob shouted over the raging gunfire, with his back pressed against the inside of the defensive mound, alongside his squadmates. "They hit those windows, and we'll ALL be killed!" He declared, in an agitated state, as he looked up at the

360 degree panoramic promenade window surrounding the deck in its entirety.

"Unlikely!" Mordin enthusiastically offered up, with an optimistic shake of his head. "Two separate layers of eighteen-inch thick, asari developed aphriveridyne polycarbonate glass. Would take several hits, clustered closely together, to weaken integrity and produce breach."

The devil's ears must've been ringing, because at that moment, four horribly well-placed shots buried themselves into the massive glass window, behind the sea of hostages, in a cluster with a diameter no larger than a manhole cover. As the final round found its mark, the four became a topology, connected to each other by cracks in the glass, which seemed to branch out and spread like the ink from a polygraph.

The whole squad sat looking on at the cracking glass, wide eyed, with a gulp lodged half-way down their throats.

"Alright, this ends now!" Shepard barked, as he raised the sidearm he'd acquired. "They had their chance! Take 'em down!"

They turned, primed for combat, as they peeked their heads over the mound of refuse, and began to pick out their targets.

"Come on, Shepard! Let's see what you got!" Kim yelled, in a self-consumed fury, at the fore of his battalion, still continuing to fire with a burning hatred swelling in his chest. As his smoking weapon clicked - indicating it was depleted, he drew back it back, and turned to face his subordinates.

"We worked too hard for this!" He proclaimed, as he ejected the empty clip onto the floor, and grabbed a fresh one off the rear of his belt. "They're the only thing standing between you and the fortunes you deserve!" He shouted, as he popped in a fresh clip, and turned back, priming his impressive pistol for another attack. "Are you gonna let them take that away from you?! They wanted an answer, we gave them our answer! Now give them hell! Two groups flank from the left and right! Use the pillars for cover. The rest storm in for a frontal assault! We'll box 'em in and finish 'em off! Now! CHARGE!"

After a momentary abeyance in the gunfire, Shepard and Company popped up to take their shots, only to be met with a sight which was tantamount to General Robert E. Lee's mile charge across Cemetery Hill. A screaming horde of blue and gold blitzed across the open deck once littered with casino machines and gaming tables. With their weapons raised, the front line of the disheveled rabble began firing wildly, with a crazed and panicked look in their eyes. It was a spray and pray tactic that yielded no results save for riddling the defensive mound of refuse with a litter of new bullet pockets, and drilling a few new holes into the hopefully tenacious glass.

Caught off guard for a moment, by what they were witnessing, The Normandy Team quickly got their bearings back and took aim. POW! POW! POW! RATATAT! TAT! Came the deafening thunder crack of gunfire, as blazing streaks of tracer fire zoomed back and forth, like flaming tennis balls across a net.

Handfuls of Kim's villainous lapdogs toppled over, collapsing to the floor, clutching at the wounds in their chests, throats, or shoulders; or simply succumbing to the slumber of death, as mass-accelerated rounds pierced their skulls. Even soâ€¦ It wasn't enough to cull the multifarious onslaught of security officers. The deck was instantaneously transformed into a battlefield, as the appearance of two flanking groups, from both directions, quickly made their presence known - popping in and out of cover, from the pillars, to take a few shots, as they moved in fast.

"They're closing in too fast!" Young Zee cried out, in a bit of a panic as he tried to pick his shots, aiming for the hearts of his former co-workers. "We'll never hold 'em back!"

"Like hell we won't!" Jacob refused to acknowledge, as he shot to his feet, and gallantly vaulted over their defensive mound. "Cover me!"

He charged headlong into the heart of the oncoming horde, and quickly became the singled-out target, as the encroaching security team took aim. Raising their weapons against him was a death wish, however, as they were quickly picked off.

"Give 'em hell, handsome!" A feminine voice, from a raven haired beauty shouted out as Vanessa covered his approach with surprising accuracy.

Near the center of the deck, the screaming, snarling pack of uniformed malcontents converged on Jacob, as his hands lit up with a raging blue biotic flame. Still blitzing forward, his whole body became awash in the same blue conflagration.

"TRY THIS ONE ON FOR SIZE!" Jacob screamed, with a fury, as he clenched his fists, and collapsed his arms against his chest, only to release a powerful and deadly shockwave of biotic energy. The wave radiated out from him, sweeping across the floor like a sonic boom. The blast crashed against the wall of guard like the gavel of the gods, taking them off their feet, and tossing them into the air, like ragdolls.

As the two flanking groups continued their approach, a youthful krogan smiled with glee. His throat rattled with a growl, as he stood up, and charged straight through the wall of refuse - nevermind going over it. He plowed through it like a train through a brick wall.

"FACE THE MIGHT OF URDNOT GRUNT!" He screamed, as he charged the group oncoming from the left. "RAAARGH!" He snarled, as he plowed his left shoulder into a salarian, slammed a fearsome right-handed blow into a turian, and took a shot with his pistol, at a human â€" all within the span of two seconds.

Gordon touched the tips of his fingers to his targetting visor, as he watched the battle unfold. As the world before him transitioned into a thermal-view picture of bright oranges and dull blues, he could make out the shifty approach of the auxiliary officers moving in from the left and right, behind the sanctuary of the numerous stone pillars.

"They're flanking us!" The fearless physicist proclaimed as he

brandished his weapon, readying it for the first face that would pop out. It wasn't one face that would pop out, however, it was three, as the infestation of corrupted security officials moved in a lot faster than anticipated. Gordon, Legion, Garrus, Mordin, and Shepard, all primed their weapons â€" firing shot after shot, as the uniformed goons moved in closer, and closer, like ants swarming a sugary treat on the floor.

To the terrified citizens the crew was trying to protect, their world explodedâ€¦ From an affluent life of luxury and lavish amenities, to shrieks, shudders, and prayers, as bullets whizzed by over their heads. They looked on, helpless and hopeless, as a small handful of guardians stood poised to defend them â€" but it was plain and clear that they surely would be swallowed up by the seemingly endless mass of blue and gold.

"Sir!" Zee shouted out, addressing Garrus, over the raging maelstrom of gunfire, as his sidearm's muzzle flash intermittently painted his face with a vibrant glow. "I wanna tell you that even though we're probably about to dieâ€¦!! Meeting you has made this the best day of my life!"

"About to die?!" Garrus retorted, with a dubiously sarcastic snicker. "Kid, I didn't survive Saren, the Collectors, AND the Reapers to die here!"

As a trio of troops came charging up to his doorstep, so to speak, Garrus hoisted up a tall, cylindrical trash can, which was formerly part of their defensive mound, and held it up in front of him and the kid, as a shield. Several pointed protrusions jumped out of the steel, where the rounds left their mark - luckily they weren't powerful enough to fully pierce through. With the officers still firing, Garrus launched the trashcan into the chests and faces of the dull witted guards, knocking the guns out of their hands and toppling them to the floor, as they caught the receptacle. With cheetah-like reflexes, Garrus leapt over the standing debris mound, and pounced onto the downed officers, putting his foot on the trash can, effectively pinning them down underneath, as he dispatched them with three clean shots to their exposed skulls.

Zdrawkoh stood with eyes drawn wide, and his mouth agape - both stunned and impressed. He gulped, smiled, and shook his head, all at once. "Ah, what the hellâ€¦!" He said with a sigh, as he readied a war cry, and vaulted over. "For Palaven!"

In the end, the defensive mound served little use to the outnumbered Normandy crew, as they weaved themselves into a bloody clash against the ship's aggressors. But it did serve to protect the terrified mass of innocents, watching helplessly from the floor, from stray rounds.

The rampaging officers moved in like a frenzied storm. But it wasn't the first storm this crew had weathered, and it most certainly wouldn't be the last. For Gordonâ€¦ he was back within the corridors of Black Mesa - back roaming the streets of City 17; consumed by the primal, animalistic impulse to hunt and survive that overtook him each time he found a gun in his hand. His jade pupils curtailed to a fine speck. His breathing slowed, his chest tightened, and his teeth clenched to a breaking point. Each blue and gold malcontent that fell before his smoking pistol was another soldier in black and white army

fatigues - another Combine abomination in CP armaments. One by one they came into his view, and one after another they fell as the scent of his smoking barrel reached his nostrils.

To a man like Shepard, however, instinct and impulse weren't nearly as valuable as were training and discipline - as well as a tenure for the battlefield. With a deluge of poorly trained rent-a-cops closing in around him, like so many of Saren's geth, or Collector Drones, he took up a small metallic corner table, and held it out, like a riot shield. His gaze quickly panned across the floor, assessing the threats from most to least pressing and severe. One he saw stirring, like a cunning rat, from the corner of his eye, lurched out from behind a nearby pillar and lunged in his direction. He took aim and fired, putting two rounds into the would-be assassin. Before the blood splatter could even reach him, the clicking of metallic weaponry drew his attention to the opposite side. He spun around, holding the table up just as a series of rounds drilled into it, where his heart would've been. POW! POW! POW! POW! Another fusillade from his weapon, and another handful of hoods was felled. As more of the seemingly endless cavalcade of blue and gold blitzed towards him, he raised his weapon and pulled the trigger. Click. Empty. No matter - John disposed of his weapon, and gripped the table stem with both hands - using it like a battering ram, as he charged forward like an angry bull seeing red. He ran down another series of assailants, causing one of them to fling their handgun straight up into the air, on impact. John's eyes tracked the weapon, as the ship's artificial gravity brought it right back down into his hands. A rapid swing to pistol whip the nearest enemy, and it was back into the fray again!

* * *

><p>Unremitting was the enemy on the bridge as well, as the metal mechs continued to pour in - squeezing their way through the narrow door two by two. Shards of scrap metal and debris were tossed about the entire room. It was all that remained of the mindless drones that marched in only to be dispatched - but even so, there seemed to be no end in sight.<p>

Miranda's forehead glistened with sweat and her dampened black hair dripped with it, as it matted down against the sides of her cheeks. Each breath she took was a labored gasp, as her hands flickered with a waning biotic flame. Using her power she scooped up a hefty pile of obliterated mech parts, and raised it into the air. The mound hovered for a moment, rotating and clumped together within a biotic cocoon, before Miranda's hand expanded, causing the pile to explode like a frag grenade. Bits and pieces of the already destroyed mechs slammed against the standing ones, like shrapnel from a bomb, decimating them where they stood. But they just kept coming - unfazed and undeterred.

Click. Click. A familiar sound rang out from Tali's submachine gun, as she too did her best to circumvent a mechanical horde, which surely had to have an end. As her smoking sub-machine gun fired its last round, she reached around behind her, to the ammo slots on her belt, only to find them as empty as the gun in her hands.

"Argh, I'm out!" She griped, with a nervous shake of her hand.

Miranda glanced over at her, with a panicked look, out of the corner of her eye. She gulped, and mustered every last bit of biotic energy she could, to generate a shimmering blue wall. A wall which glided across the floor, sweeping away debris and mechs like a broom to litter. Her barrier then lodged itself within the opened doorway â€” creating a temporary seal to keep the mechs at bay.

The metal troops began to pile outside of the sealed doorway, trying to push through it, like flies butting against a glass window to reach the warm glow of daylight. And their voices coalesced into an infuriating, nonsensical cacophony of monotonous orders of surrender. "HALT. INTRUDERS DETECTED. PLEASE REL" "RELINQUISH YOUR WEAP" "HALT. INT" "PREPARE TO" "EXECUTED. HALT PLEASE-"

"TALI, I CAN'T KEEP THIS UP!" Miranda cried out, almost in tears, as she held two trembling arms out in front of her; her raised hands flickering with a dying blue flame.

Knowing this had to stop, and now, Tali's eyes quickly panned across the bridge. It didn't take long for her to spot two hands gripping the edge of one of the consoles, as a head draped with a burgundy hood peeked over ever so cautiously. As soon as Leahr realized he'd garnered the other quarian's attention, he quickly tried to duck back down, like a skittish groundhog, out of sight, and out of mind.

"YOU!" Tali snarled, as she marched around the console. She grabbed a rolling chair, and hurled it aside like it was nothing but an empty cardboard box, as Leahr cowered and cringed on the floor, with his balled up hands covering his face. Tali reached down, grabbed a handful of the loose cloth from his veil, near his neck, and dragged him up to his feet.

"The control node to shut these things down!" She demanded, as she jerked and shook him violently. "Where is it?! Give it to me!"

"The control nodeâ€¦?!" Leahr responded, behind the sound of a gulp. "Uhmâ€¦ I-I-I-It was destroyed!" He claimed, as he subtly pushed his active laptop underneath the nearest console, with his heel, to obscure it from sight. "Yeah! Those security grunts broke it. The mechs'll only respond to my voice commands now... And I told you I'd only shut 'em down if you swear you'll let me go!"

"Now you listen to me you little bosh'tet!" Tali roared in a rage, as she hoisted the little worm up further, only to slam him down against the console, bending him backwards over it.

"Argh!" He yelped, in pain. Though he didn't dare try to resist or fight back.

"You think I'm an idiot?!" She demanded, about ready to throttle him. "You might be able to fool one of those lowbrow security peons, but I know a proprietary master-slave protocol when I see one! If the control node had been destroyed, they'd all go into shut down! So where is it?!"

Leahr's only response was an impregnable silence.

"Is it one of these consoles?! Your Omni-tool?! I swear by the ancestors I will BREAK YOUR ARM OFF to get at it if I have

to!"

"You're gonna have to kill me!" Leahr offered up with the shaky voice of a frightened child, as he shook his head. "Either kill me or let me go! Because I swear I won't let you take me! I can't get caught! I won't!"

Since the eyes were the only features quarians could truly distinguish under those dark helmets they wore, they had become quite adept at reading the subtle language of the eyes. And at that moment, Tali's glimmering gaze narrowed with a seething fury, that held nothing but contempt and hatred for her fellow Rannochian! Trembling, Leahr shut his own eyes, and awaited whatever fate would befall him - he would not budge from here!

Suddenly, a beeping sound buzzed in his ear, as the console he was bent over backwards on top of, lit up. Tali glanced up as a holographic message began to flash just above Leahr's head: [NEARING RELAY: DISENGAGEMENT SEQUENCE INITIATED]

* * *

><p>The entire casino floor had been consumed by the fighting. A violent, bloody mangle between a handful of combatants and an army of renegade security officers. They were uncoordinated and poorly trained, but even so - their sheer numbers more than made up for any deficit. Through quick reflexes, keen instincts, and elite training, most of the Normandy crew stood their ground, and held their own, in the midst of the bloody maelstrom avoiding the haphazard gunfire. For the most part!

"RRRRAAARGH!" Grunt bellowed, as he charged a quartet of officers, standing in a nice little row for him - his ferocious growl was suddenly silenced, when! POW! POW! Twin booming shots rang out, accompanied by a bright flash from the pistol of the officer at the fore. Grunt stopped and gulped! He felt a piercing throb in his gut, as something warm oozed down his leg. He looked down, draping his hand over the source of the pain in his solar plexus. When he pulled it off, he found his palm soaked in the crimson gloss of his own blood. That's when he tasted the blood rushing up his throat. It started to pool and overflow in his mouth, as a warm trickle oozed down his lip.

The offending officers just stood there for a moment - perhaps waiting for him to collapse, fall to his knees, or surrender. It was so surreal when they watched an insidious grin grow on his face, as he torqued his neck around like a wrestler stretching before a match.

"Hmph." The krogan chuckled, as he walked right up to the line of guards - who just stood in awe over his resilience. "Any more rounds in those weapons?" He casually asked.

The officer at the front - the salarian who had pulled the trigger - glanced down at his weapon before looking back up; eyes wide open with a dumbstruck countenance. "Y-yeah..."

"Good." Grunt acknowledged. "Then don't hesitate next time. RAAARGH!" He snarled, as he suddenly wrapped his tree-trunk like arms around the salarian's neck - snapping it instantly, as he hoisted his now

lifeless body up and actually flung him into the others, like a sack of potatoes. As they scattered and tried to flee, they found themselves trampled and crushed by his pounding feet and pummeling blows. To a krogan, there's nothing quite so exhilarating as the taste of bloodâ€” Even if it's his ownâ€”

Jacob spotted the uniformed asari closing in on his right, through the narrowed corner of his eye. His shirt collar was soaked in perspiration, and his face dripped with sweat, as he tried to steady his labored breathing. Subtly watching her draw her sidearm forward, he had already picked out his own weapon of choice. His flaming fingers fanned out over a large, sterling-silver, circular serving tray he spotted on the floor. It was quickly swallowed up by a shimmering blue luminance, and it rose up into the air before him, before being immediately hurled at the asari like a clay pigeon in a skeet shoot.

"Argh!" She cried out, as the sizeable silver disk slammed against her arm, knocking the gun out of her hand, and leaving it throbbing.

"Have a seat, Miss!" He sarcastically obliged - following up by hurling a large cushioned lounge chair straight against the broad side of her body. WHAM! It careened into her with percussive force, sending her rattled, limp body flying across the floor, and tumbling to the ground, alongside the chair.

"Ungh..." Jacob exhaled a heaving breath, as he huddled over, with his hands resting on his thighs, desperately inhaling to rejuvenate his oxygen starved lungs.

But there'd be no peace for the weary here. As he glanced up â€” eyes glazed over, and vision blurred â€” he saw another quartet of Illustria troopers closing in and fanning out around him, like hyenas cornering a wounded animal.

The stalwart operative sneered, as he sucked up one last breath of air, and stood upright. He clenched his fists into two waning biotic torches, and taunted them in with the look on his face.

"Take this!" He berated, as he flung his hands out, unleashing a tidal wave of biotic energy. At least, he intended it to be a tidal wave... What came out, however, was a soft gust of blue light. It swept across the floor, and brushed against his enemies like a strong breeze; doing little more than wobbling them where they stood, before it dissipated into nothingness. Jacob gasped. The world around him spun, like a tilt-a-whirl. Completely spent; his eyes rolled back into his head, and his already fading vision went dark, as he collapsed to ground on all fours. His vision pulsated with every beat of his heart - with every throb of his head, as he glanced up to see the four officers closing in around him, like vultures circling a carcass. As he looked up, the last thing he saw before his vision went dark, was the baby blue visage of an asari aiming her weapon at the center of his head.

"Oh no you don't!" He heard a woman's adamant decree cry out from a distant dream. He clung to consciousness, anticipating a gunshot that never came. And what followed was a grating raucous of slams, thuds, crashes, and thumps, intertwined with a piercing series of agonized moans, groans, wails, and shrieks.

"Humph!" Argh!" "Uagh!" "Why you-AUGH! MY ARM!"

As the symphony of pain reached its apex, it all suddenly went silentâ€¦ Jacob remained prone on the floor - his fingertips clawing at the cashmere carpet. He couldn't seem to force his eyelids open again. His weak and enfeebled arms trembled turbulently, as he tried to push himself up. And his throat hissed with each heaving breath he took. Finally, he clenched his eyes shut tighter than before, groaning in pain, before finally managing to pry them apart and face his fate.

As his eyes blinked rapidly, nothing could've prepared him for what he would see. He expected to find a gun in his face, or worse still; some enticing, celestial light, beckoning him to the divine at the end of an ethereal tunnel. But no. This may not be heaven, but the first thing that popped into his head was that he had surely been greeted by an angel.

Over him stood an alabaster skinned beauty, with raven black hair, eyes of gentle lilac, and lips gleaming like first light from the morning sun. She was primitively dressed in a brown bath towel, wrapped underneath his own tan sport coat, giving her the guise of some amazonian goddess come to rescue him, as she stood over him, radiating, with a pistol twirling on her index finger, and four defeated security guards laid out at her feetâ€¦

"Tell me, Mr. Taylorâ€¦" Vanessa began nonchalantly, as bullets whizzed by overhead. "You're not one of those types who can't admit he just got saved by a lady, are you?" She asked, with a bat of her lashes.

"Hehâ€¦" Jacob released a pained chuckle, as he tried staggering back to his feet. "No ma'amâ€¦ Hell, I wouldn't care if you carried me off bridal styleâ€¦ So long as it's you doing the saving."

Vanessa's face took a red hue. She demurely turned her head allowing her hair to drape over, and cover her face. Apparently, feeling very bashful - a new experience for her.

"Just answer me one questionâ€¦" She heard Jacob ask. She peeked out at him, watching him survey the fallen officers she'd dispatched, through the dark strands of her hair. "Who are you, Vanessa Mastersâ€¦?!"

"Mmm, won't it be fun getting to know me!" She exclaimed with glee, lifting her gaze back up.

Nearby, an ambitious young turian donned in the same uniform as the rest of the Illustria Security force pressed his back against a towering pillar, as he attempted to sneak his way towards his target objective. He peeked his head around the pillar, and found that the entire room was distracted by the raging battle that had been joined. A handful of veteran combatants against an untold legion of mediocre officers - and the handful was winning. With the clear opportunity to gain some ground and utilize the element of surprise, he darted over to the next pillar in the line, diving into an unnecessary combat roll to reach it. He popped up a few feet short, and quickly united himself with it, once again back first. Peeking out once more, he spotted a trio of enemy combatants, that were sure to be easy

pickings.

The young turian retracted his head. He leaned back against the pillar, raised his gun, and took a deep breath. "I can do this!" He whispered to himself, trying to strengthen his constitution. After a moment of self-psyching, he clutched his pistol tightly, and swooped out of cover.

"Freeze!" Zee demanded of his former fellow officers, as he ran in with his weapon primed and brandished, like a SWAT officer during a raid. The three nearby guards reciprocated with a startled jolt, as they turned their own weapons on him.

"Don't move! Put your weapons down!"

"Hey!" The male human officer at the center of the three uttered, as his eyes narrowed on Zee. "I know you!" He said with the grip on his weapon growing a little lax. "You're the new guy! The one Commander Kim told us to toss up here, along with everyone else. What? You're fighting with these guys now?!"

"Darn right I am!" Zee adamantly declared, as he jerked his weapon around, back and forth amongst the three. "Now do as I said! Drop your weapons!"

"Kid, you're not too bright, are ya?" The human speaker said, with a guffaw. "There's one of you. Three of us. And we all got guns too! You put YOUR weapon down. Or WE are gonna shoot YOU!"

"I don't think so!" He quipped, with a sneer worthy of a B action movie, as he grit his teeth and pulled back on the trigger.

Click! Click, click, click... Click!

His obstinate visage quickly melted into a look of panic as his weapon suddenly refused to fire. Just then, his sidearm began yielding a harsh buzzing noise, as a red holographic light blinked on its side.

[WEAPON JAM] It flashed on and off.

"Oh you gotta be kidding...!" He muttered frantically, as he desperately began fiddling with the stock and barrel. Click. Click. "Damn, cheap, piece of shit hardware!"

"Heh, having a bit of trouble there, are we...?" The mocking chuckle of the human officer regained his attention. He gazed back up at the trio; each of which looked on with weapons drawn and cocksure grins on their faces. After wrestling with his weapon a bit more proved ultimately useless, he looked up with an undeterred resolve on his face, and did the only thing he could think of.

"Huah!" He grunted as he flung his gun, like a boomerang, aiming for the human's head. He missed!

The officer had only to duck slightly to avoid it, as the entourage began closing in on the panicking young turian.

Zee gulped, looking around, out of the corners of his eyes, hoping to spot something that would help him, as the trio moved against him. He

backed away, and they followed menacingly, at an equal rate. There was nothing in sight to aid him, and the rest of the Normandy crew had their own hands full, as the violent and bloody confrontation raged on across the deck. He was on his ownâ€|

"Give it up, kidâ€|" The human ordered, as they continued their nefarious approach against the backtracking young turian. "Maybe if you get down on your knees and beg - we'll let you live."

"Yeah?!" Zee rebelliously began to reply. "And maybe you should all kiss my-humph!", When he was suddenly interrupted by the loss of his own equilibrium, after having tripped over something rather sturdy on the ground.

He landed onto the carpeted floor, on his hands and rear, with the maligned trio of officers gathered around him. They chuckled at his misfortune, like a pack of bullies who'd just shoved the scrawny kid on the playground, into the mud. That's when they all casually took note of what had tripped him, including Zee himself. There at the base of his right heel, was Commander Kim's own weathered, silvery shotgun - nylon strap and all.

Their gleeful grins melted, as their grips tightened on their weapons. They'd all let their guards down, and let the pistols hang and their sides. But it was plainly evident now that they were hesitant to make a move, as this was about to turn into a 'who could shoot who fastest' contest.

Zee sat there, still as a log - his eyes darting back and forth between his former co-workers, as he gulped. At that infinitesimal moment, he spotted the slightest twitch from the human at the fore queuing him to make his move. Just as the three began to raise their weapons, Zee kicked the shotgun with the back of his heel, causing it to slide it across the floor, straight into his open, waiting hand. No time to prime it, he rolled out of the way a split second before a barrage of bullets peppered the carpeted floor leaving it cratered, with shreds and tufts of carpet flying like confetti. He rapidly rolled onto his back, a few feet away, with the weapon in his embrace. In a mad frenzy, he took hold of the barrel and stock, and wrapped his finger around the trigger. As the maligned interlopers swung their pistols in his direction, with a sudden turn - BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! Like the earsplitting roar from a thundering sky, the shotgun blared out, with force, as Zee fired one shot after another. He rended and pierced their fragile flesh with searing steel. They flew to the ground, bloodied, lifeless, and unrecognizable, as Zee laid recumbent, holding a smoking gun in his hands, and a look of disbelief on his face.

"Whewâ€|" He exhaled a flustered sigh, as he sat up and slouched down, with the shotgun in his lap. "I definitely don't get paid enough for this job! I quit!"

As the rumble of the shifting battle raged on, another rumble soon became evident. A slow hum emanated from somewhere deep beneath the ship. It was obvious enough to jingle the chandeliers overhead, but subtle enough that it wouldn't spill a glass of wine on a table. Outside the Promenade's panoramic window, the long streaks of starlight immediately condensed to burning pinholes in the black curtain of space, as the ship left FTL travel.

The tranquil stars hung serenely in the black ether, twinkling like sequins, as the *Illustria* zoomed to a stop in the vicinity of a nearby Mass Relay. The relay's gyrating rings spun with a rhythmic centrifuge, generating an inviting blue spectre of energy and radiation. But as the nose of the once luxurious cruise ship stood poised to take the sojourn into the relay, one last obstacle remained.

About a dozen, or so, Alliance Ships made up a blockade, which cordoned off the relay against such interlopers. And heading the frontline was the shining flagship of the Alliance's might - The *Orizaba*. A dreadnought, still bearing the scars of the Battle of the Black Tide. Most of the damaged hull, fuselage, and compartments had been repaired and replaced, but the unpainted grey steel where she'd been hit time and again served as testament to the rage and the fire she'd seen.

Just then, the *Carmenta Illustria*, as if acting of it's own accord, continued on, directly on its course towards the relay. It showed no sign of yielding to obstacles or impediments - it was going to pass through that relay, and nothing was going to stop it.

"We're still moving!" Miranda shouted out, in a pained and straining voice, as her glowing, quivering hands still struggled to maintain the ebbing biotic barrier that kept the unyielding mechanical battalion outside.

"The ship's still being piloted by my VI!" Leahr announced, still bent over backwards, on the front console, at Tali's mercy. "It's programmed to take the ship through the relay, no matter what!"

"But there's an Alliance Blockade out there, in front of it! We'll crash!" Tali asserted in retort.

"Then we'll crash!" The burgundy veiled quarian replied, with the makings of a flustered chuckle under his breath. Tali looked up at the small armada of ships. They didn't seem poised to attack, but they meant business. And she wondered for, a moment, if they'd actually move out of the way.

"Tali, you've got to stop this ship!" Miranda pleaded, in pain. "If it passes through that relay, we're finished!"

"You won't stop it in time!" Leahr nervously assured, with a rapid shake of his head. "There's no way."

"We'll see about that!" The quarian femme fatale roared, as she hoisted him up by his collar, and tossed him aside, sending him tumbling to the floor.

"What?" Leahr beckoned, laid out on his back, as he watched Tali go to work on the forward console. "No! What are you doing?"

* * *

><p>"Captain Donaghy, ma'am!" An male ensign on the bridge of the *Orizaba* respectfully addressed the presiding superior, who stood over the front rail of the ship, looking out the window.<p>

Erin Donaghy was a tall, slender woman, with copper colored eyes, and

short, amber colored hair, that didn't quite reach her wore a decorated gold and blue Alliance Naval uniform, as she held her head high; her chin jutted forward with a poise that commanded the highest estate of respect.

"Ma'am, the ship is showing no sign of deviation from its current flight path." The ensign addressed again, as Erin paid him a close ear. "They're still on direct course for the relay."

"Hail them."

"Already tried, ma'am." The ensign replied. "They're communications are either down or blocked. We can't open a line."

Erin stood silent for a moment, watching the ship growing larger in the window, as it came right for them. She gave an ever so subtle shake of her head, as her grimace grew dire.

"Shall we stand fast, ma'am?"

"No!" Captain Donaghy ordered, with a sigh. "Our blockade isn't going to deter them. And there's too many innocents on-board. We've no choice but to clear a path. Scatter! Radio the other ships and tell them to let 'em through."

As the order went out, Tali watched as outside, the the small fleet of Alliance vessels cordoning off the relay engaged their engines, and began to disperse, like rabbits abandoning a den. She didn't let it bother her, as he fingers continued to dance across the keys of light, interrupted.

Leahr laid on his belly, looking up at her from his place on the floor, as he began to see his future unfurl. The ship would be boarded by the Alliance. He'd be arrested, hauled off in handcuffs, and extradited into the custody of the Migrant Fleet, where he'd be tried for a number of charges - any one of which, would most certainly result in exile. Or execution if he was lucky... He looked back at Miranda - the staunch and stubborn human biotic, holding a mounting onslaught of mechs at bay, with a buckling biotic wall.

"No!" He whispered to himself, as he turned back to Tali, and summoned an omni-tool on his right forearm, which he quickly turned into a blue, arching, electrical, omni-taser.

With one final keystroke, Tali withdrew her hands from the terminal. She looked out the window, as the ship continued on towards its destination, without the slightest hint of slowing. The bridge was painted in a pulsating blue, electrical glow, as the light from the relay's heart spilled in from the window - growing to a near blinding luminescence, as the ship drew ever closer.

Leahr slowly crawled over to the lavender veiled quarian, in a prone position. With Tali distracted, he cocked his arm back, and suddenly jammed his omni-taser straight into the sinewy back of her ankle.

"AAAUGGH!" She shrieked; her horrid cry echoing across the bridge, as she twitched and spasmed violently, with the agonizing jolt coursing through every nerve in her body.

Miranda spun around at the sound, keeping her hands holding the barrier out in front of her. "Tali!" She called out, as she watched Tali convulse and seize up, before collapsing to the ground.

"VOICE COMMAND!" Leahr yelled out, as loud as his lungs would allow, after pulling the omni-taser away. "IMPLEMENT NON-LETHAL COUNTER-MEASURES! TEAR GAS!"

"Voice print acknowledged. Command confirmed." A robotic voice from the other side of the biotic wall accepted, as tiny jets mounted onto the LOKI's shoulders suddenly began to hiss, and a cloud of grey smoke started to seep into the room. Miranda's biotic barrier may have been successfully keeping physical matter out, but it was far from airtight.

As the pungent cloud reached her eyes and nostrils, they immediately began to burn like a searing flame to bare flesh. Her breath was immediately constricted, and she clenched her eyes shut, as streams of tears flooded out. "Ack! Augh-aack! Ack!" She coughed, and gasped, and heaved for air, as each breath she took was like poison to her lungs. She wheezed for oxygen, and her barrier began to fail, as she could no longer maintain the concentration to keep it up.

Finally, Miranda succumbed to the effects of the noxious fumes. She clenched her pouring eyes, and cupped her hands over her mouth and nose, in an attempt to keep from respiring in.

Leahr saw this, and popped up to all fours. "Voice Command! Stun gun!" He shouted, as the mechs quickly began to pour in again.

The slender mechanical man at the front of the crowd raised his unarmed hand - two metal fingers outstretched. And out from his fingertips, shot twin barbed, metallic probes, attached to a thin conductive wire.

Miranda felt the probes pierce the skin in her left and right chest, like the burning sting from an angry hornet, as the barbs immediately began to conduct a powerful electrical jolt.

"AAARRRRGGGGHHHH!" Miranda screamed in agony, as she too writhed and wrenched, with her entire muscular system instantly paralyzed. After a few seconds, which seemed like an eternity, the tormenting shock came to a stop, leaving Miranda gasping in an out, as rapidly as her heart pounded in her chest. Her legs instantly buckled beneath her, and she collapsed onto the floor.

Leahr shot back to his feet, and immediately ran towards the offending LOKI. He snatched the SMG right out of its idle hand, and aimed it down at the two fallen females.

His hand shook turbulently, as he pointed it down, alternating back and forth between the two women.

"I'm sorryâ€¦ Truly I am!" He earnestly divulged, with a choked back knot in his throat. "I never meant for any of this to happenâ€¦ And don't think that I'm doing this for Tarrik, or that human Security Commander, or the krogan. I don't care what happens to them. Those bosh'tets can rot for all I care! I-infact I even tried to help you!" He said, with a rapid, stuttering voice. "I covered up the breach on

the loading bay so they wouldn't find you! So that you'd come and stop them! They'reâ€¦ They're lunatics! They want to kill people. Sell them into slavery. I never wanted that! I never wanted to kill anyone! But nowâ€¦ Now I need to get awayâ€¦! I can't get caught!" He affirmed. "I have to make it to Rannochâ€¦" He proclaimed with a shaky voice - his eyes drowning in tears, as he looked down at Tali, perhaps seeking clemency or compassion. "Our people have a homeworld now. I HAVE TO see it! Surely you, of all people, can understand thatâ€¦ can't youâ€¦?!"

Tali turned her head and glanced up at the visage of this broken down, mad quarian, aiming a gun down at her. She didn't have the strength to respond. Her energy been sapped and her muscles were tight - quivering and spasming sporadically against her will. She glanced over at Miranda, who laid on her back, much in the same state. With nothing else to do, she simply rested her head back down. That's when she spotted it; a few feet in front of her face, tucked away underneath the front console, was a folded up laptop with a flashing orange light, indicating an active connection.

Leahr glanced up, and looked out the window. The ship was still moving forward, and the relay was immense now. It's spinning, voltaic heart was all that could be seen in the window, as its magnificent, gargantuan size could only now be fully appreciated. Despite the Illustria's impressive girth, she was but a toy in proximity to the Alaeve Relay. He glanced over the controls, and a quick check of the terminal reassured him that the ship was still en route to pass through.

As the light from the relay grew nearly blinding, the kiss from the first electrical arc made contact with the ship's nose. Like bio-luminescent tentacles from some ethereal beast, several bolts of lightning shot out from the relay, drawing it into it's galvanizing embrace. Leahr exhaled a sigh of relief. They were passing through the relay, at long lastâ€¦

"Hehâ€¦" A sudden labored chuckle from Tali caused Leahr concern, as he turned back down to face her. "Heheh-cgh" She laughed and coughed all at once. "You stupidâ€¦ littleâ€¦ bosh'tet!" She reviled, planting her elbows on the floor, and struggling to lift her head up. "You think I was trying to STOP the ship?!" She cynically asked, as Leahr looked on, dumbfounded. "I wasn't trying to stop itâ€¦ I was changing the relay destination!"

"WHAT?!"

39. Chapter 39: Battle For The Illustria IV

****Salvation: Episode I - The Taking of the Carmenta Illustria****

Disclaimer: This fan-fiction is part of an episodic series taking place after Salvation: A Half-Life/Mass Effect Universe Fan Fiction, which will lead directly to its sequel, Salvation II: Project Prometheus. These episodes and sequel take place OUTSIDE of the Mass Effect 3 continuity. Characters property of their respective companies, Half-Life created by Valve and Mass Effect created by Bioware.

****Chapter 39: Battle for the Illustria (Part IV)****

****Withdrawal****

A series of bright, thrumming lights flash outside of the windows, accompanied by sparking bolts of electricity. They grew brighter and more constant, as the loud buzz, synonymous with relay travel began resonating across the ship.

The rumble of the ship, the flash of light, and the buzz of the relay's embrace had an almost hypnotic effect on the combatants within the once lavish casino, as officer and Normandy crew alike ceased their bloody struggle for a fleeting glance through the Promenade Deck's panoramic windows. Commander Kim grinned as the flashing grew to a blazing, shining apex igniting the entire panoramic pane surrounding the deck, like a celestial ribbon of light.

A subtle feeling of the inertia shifting beneath their feet heralded passage through the relay, as the light faded once more, into the blackness of space, in a whole new region of the galaxy.

"IT'S ALL OVER, SHEPARD!" The one-eyed cretin called out, into the crowd, as a sinking feeling settled into the pit of John's stomach.

"WE JUST PASSED THROUGH THE RELAY!" Kim's self-arrogant spiel continued. "ANY MINUTE NOW, THIS SHIP IS GOING TO BE CRAWLING WITH AN ARMY OF BATARIAN SLAVERS! NOT EVEN YOU WILL BE ABLE TO CONTEND WITH THEM ALL! YOU'VE LOST!"

Just then, like an avatar of justice, Commander Kim was silenced by what appeared in the window. It was the colossal, monumental visage of a massive, asari built ship which hovered across the pane - it's pristine, recognizable hull glistening in the righteous, lavender light, from a nearby star.

"What the fuckâ€|?!" He gasped to himself, after immediately recognizing the renowned war vessel. "That's the Destiny Ascension...! WE'RE AT THE GOD DAMNED CITADEL!"

* * *

><p>"The Citadel?!" Leahr shrieked, in a panic, as he clutched at his head with both hands; his fingers digging into his veil. "Noâ€|! No, no, no! We can't be here!" He exclaimed, frantically shaking his head.<p>

Tali glanced over to Miranda. The iron-willed operative was still laid out on her back, but there was a sign of life. Miranda turned her head, and the two women locked eyes. There on the floor, surrounded by mechs, they communicated an unmistakable accord, with their eyes, to finish this.

"What do I doâ€|? What do I do?!" Leahr rambled to himself, in a craze, with his hands tugging at the sides of his veil. "Iâ€| I'll turn us around!" He buoyantly announced. "I can still turn us around!"

As his fingers touched the holographic controls, preparing to steer

the ship, Miranda's hands rose from the floor, burning with a familiar biotic flame. With the last bit of strength left in her exhausted body, she sent a shockwave rippling across the floor, like a pulse grenade, which tossed the mechs nearest to her back, with considerable force.

As the clank and clamor of pounding steel arose once more, Leahr spun around just in time to see his precious mechs get tossed about against the walls, like little metal stick figures.

"No!" He screamed hysterically, as Tali lunged forward, reaching for the laptop underneath the forward console. This had to be the primary control node! She'd bet her life on it. And if she was wrong, she may be doing just that.

"Voice Command!" Leahr bellowed, as the mechs steadied and corrected themselves. "Kill them! KILL THEM BOTH!"

Tali's hand was just small enough to squeeze into the narrow space under the console. She clawed and pinched the edge of the laptop, as she heard the clacking sound of guns being readied. With the computer in her fragile grip, she slid it out and took a firm hold of it with both hands.

The mechs gathered around Miranda with their weapons aimed down. She'd be their first victim. And she was defenseless. No k-barriers, and no possibility of raising a biotic shield to protect herself. She was barely conscious as it was.

"I'm sorry you made me do this!" Leahr confessed, with a shaky voice. "Kill her!"

At that moment, he felt something powerful hook his shoulder. Tali spun her fellow quarian around, and cocked the folded laptop in her grasp back. She swung it with all her might, as if she were swinging a baseball bat, and smashed it to pieces against Leahr's helmeted face. As the laptop virtually disintegrated in Tali's hands, the force from the blow threw Leahr back hard, sending him crashing to the ground, with a fractured faceplate.

The instant the connection between the mechs and the control node was lost - the instant before they could execute the downed operative - the mechanized soldiers went into shut down. Their heads drooped over their chests, and their arms dropped to their sides, leaving them standing in place like so many metal statues.

* * *

><p>Kim rushed over to the salarian whom he had tasked with restraining the belligerent reporter, Cameron. "Give her to me!" He ordered.<p>

He locked his hand around her wrist, and pulled her away from the salarian, who willingly gave her up. Cameron glared with ire and hatred for Kim, as she was jerked back into his grasps. But the sting from the swollen red welt on her cheek kept her from trying to escape again.

"Alright, go on! Get in there!" Kim ordered the subordinate officer, pointing with his pistol, into the melee. "Attack."

"Sir?" The salarian replied with dubiety, as he glanced into the fray.

Much of the foray still persisted, but it was plainly evident which way the tide had turned. The ground was stained with the red blood of humans, the silverish blood of turians, the greenish blood of salarians, and the lavender blood of asari. But in reality, the only blood that was spilt came in two hues; blue and gold. Many of the officers laid dead - others were being restrained or subdued. But it was clear this clash would soon be over.

"Sir, what?!" Kim chided back. "Come on, get in there! We're wearing 'em down. We got 'em on the run."

"Not a chance sir!" The salarian rebutted, with a squeamish laugh as he unfastened the gun belt around his waist, and tossed it aside. "I think I'm just gonna wait right here for them!" He stated, as he went down to his knees, and locked his hands behind his head. "I'm not givin' them ANY reason to kill me. To be honest, this job stunk anyway!"

Kim sneered as the consequences of his actions were becoming painfully obvious.

"Chickenshit!" He hissed under his breath. He stopped and took a look around at his crumbling regime, trying to decide what to do. Knowing that it was only a matter of time before hostage rescue teams would board the ship in force, he decided upon a hasty retreat.

"Come on!" He snarled, as he hoisted Cameron along by her wrist; who conversely pulled against him every step of the way.

"No! No get off of me!" She screamed, trying desperately to wrench her wrist free of his grip. "Help! HELP! Dr. Freeman! Help me!"

Lucky for her, her cries for help did not fall on deaf ears, as a pair of jade eyes quickly turned and peered through the bedlam and the melee - watching as she was being carted away.

And elsewhere, by a pillar near a peaceful corner of the deck, a different pair of eyes flickered back and forth, beneath the sheath of green reptilian eyelids. The familiar cries of horror, the sound of battle and the chorus of death rattles caused an unconscious krogan to start to stir. An angry, rumbling growl grew in his chest, and reverberated from his throat, as his brow and lips started to twitch. Suddenly, his eyelids flew open, and his dilated primal pupils immediately homed in on a single man in the crowd. Shepard... The krogan's brow grew angry. His heart rate quickened with the bloodrage coursing through his veins. And his dilated pupils constricted to dagger points upon spotting the object of his vengeance, as he watched him stand against a bumbling human officer.

Commander Shepard's pistol clicked as he pulled on the trigger with the human officer directly before him. The human's face beamed with a relieved and somewhat arrogant smile, at the thought of Shepard's gun being empty. But it was a fool's smile, that was quickly smacked off his face when John bashed the barrel of his empty pistol across his

teeth, sending him crashing to the floor.

"Shepard!" He heard familiar voice call his name from behind. He turned with his depleted weapon still brandished, if only for novelty to keep any would be attackers at bay. Luckily, it was a friendly face.

"Garrus." John addressed, as he gave the empty pistol in his hand a quick examination before discarding it. "Are you alright?"

"A-ok, Shepard." The veteran turian assured, flashing the 'perfect' signal with his hand. "Looks like the girls got us safely to the Citadel. So I think we're just about done here. All that's left is the mop up."

"Good." John agreed, with a confident nod. "Let's finish it, then."

"Commander!" At that moment, another voice suddenly called out to him. Another familiar, although somewhat seldom heard voice. Both Garrus and Shepard turned to spot Gordon rushing over towards them, from behind a series of pillars, with a smoking handgun still in his hand.

"Gordon. You alright?"

"I'm fine, Shepard." Gordon quickly dismissed, as he joined the two, and peered across the vast deck. "But I've spotted our reporter friend!" He announced, as brought two fingers to the side of his visor, allowing him to zoom.

He zeroed in on a bit of commotion unfolding across the way. It appeared the cyclopean head of security was looking for escape as he made his way towards the exit with a belligerent and rebellious Cameron McClane still in tow. She was easily recognizable to him by her long blonde hair, and by his own jet black tuxedo jacket, which she was still enrobed in.

"That one-eyed security guard's got her!" He said, with genuine concern and distress in his voice, as he visor carefully tracked their movements. "We gotta save her, Shepard. If that bastard gets away with her, we'll never see her again!"

"Alright, Gordon. Let's do it!" He candidly endorsed, before turning back to his turian teammate. "Garrus. Can I count on you to wrap things up here, and give us some covering fire?"

"You need it, you got it!" Garrus acknowledged, without qualm, as he ejected a depleted thermal clip from his sidearm and replaced it with his last fresh one. "Go get that son of a bitch!"

Shepard grinned and nodded, as he gave Garrus an amiable pat on the side of his shoulder, before he and Gordon took off across the deck.

"Hey, Shepard!" Yet another voice, one fairly new to him, garnered his attention. He turned to see the young turian officer, Zee, brandishing a sturdy looking shotgun. "Catch!" He shouted, as he flung the weapon in the Commander's direction. John reached out, and snatched the hurling weapon out of the air - bestowing his gratitude

with a grateful nod before continuing on.

Kargas watched the newly armed Shepard blaze a path across the deck, alongside some other puny human who was of no interest to him. With a wrathful grimace on his face, Kargas rose to his feet and bared his teeth. His hour of vengeance was nigh.

As he stood back up, he reared his head and took a runner's stance, as he prepared to charge Shepard headon, likely to blindside him. But before he could take a single step, another krogan stepped directly into his path.

"Hehâ€|" A bruised, bloodied, and grinning Grunt greeted the elder krogan with a laugh. "It's about time you woke back up. I was hoping I'd get a shot at you!"

"Youâ€| I know youâ€|!" Kargas replied, with a look of disgust suddenly coming over his semblance. "You're the tank-bred. Okeer's progeny. Or rather, his abominationâ€|"

"Abomination?!" Grunt angrily rebuked. "I am distilled from the bloodlines of our greatest warlord ancestorsâ€| A pure krogan, in every sense of the word!"

"That may be so-" Kargas admitted. "-but there's a difference between a pure krogan and a TRUE krogan. As far as I'm concerned, you're nothing but a bastardized perversion of our entire race. Now get out of my way, welp! I've got no more time to waste on you!"

"I'll show YOU a true krogan!" The headstrong youngster bayed, as he bowed his crested head and charged forth. "RAAAAA!"

As the callow juvenile blitzed forth in a blind rage, Kargas simply stood his ground, waiting for the perfect moment... Now! The instant before Grunt could impact, Kargas sidestepped the youngster, hooking his shoulder with his arm, and actually using his own boundless momentum to plow him straight into the broadside of the pillar behind him.

"UAGH!" Grunt groaned in pain, as his face was smashed against the hard granite - actually causing a small portion of it to crumble and chip. Grunt coughed and gasped as the blow also knocked the wind out of him, and left him in a daze. Before he could recuperate, he felt himself get lifted off the ground, as Kargas hoisted him onto his shoulders, in what was almost a fireman's carry technique. He then proceeded to heave him over towards a mound of gaming machines and other discarded casino debris, and tossed him into the pile of refuse, as if he belonged there.

"It's called experience, welp!" Kargas irately chided, as pointed a finger down towards the squirming, writhing youngster half buried in the garbage heap. "Earn some!"

With this obstacle dispatched, Kargas turned his attention back towards locating Shepard. He did so just in time to watch him and the other human bolt through the deck's main exit. But thanks to the 360 degree panoramic window surrounding them, they were not out of sight yet. He watched them sprint down the long outer hallway, in pursuit of Commander Kim. And now he'd be the one giving chase.

"Come on!" Kim's wail echoed off of the long corridor's narrow walls, as he violently dragged McClane along - torquing and bruising her wrist every step of the way.

As with most of the other walkways and corridors on the ship, this one was adorned with small tables, lounging chairs and couches, as well as a vast variety of budding, decorative flora.

"Let go of me, you brute!" McClane snarled, in defiance, nearly being dragged off of her feet, as she tried desperately to pull away. "Youâ€¦ You chicken! You knew full well those men back there wouldn't stand a chance against Shepard's team! But you sent them all to their deaths anyway, just so you could get away! You're a coward!"

"The opportunity for profit's gone, darlin'." He cockily admitted, unfazed - giving a subtle shrug, as he rushed down the hall, with his hostage in tow. "It's the fall of Rome around here. I'm not stupid enough to stick around and get myself killedâ€¦ No, you're my ticket off this sinking ship."

"I'm not going anywhere with you!"

"Shut up!" He snarled, as he dragged her towards a small enclosure tucked into the far stern end of the deck, which housed the main passenger elevators.

"Hey, hold it!" An unexpected voice suddenly ordered - echoing from a good distance down the hall. Kim immediately spun himself around, turning Cam with him in the process, as he was greeted by the visage of a man in a bloodied dress shirt, silver metallic cast, and a glowing targeting visor, darting down the hall, in their direction with the unmistakable outline of Commander Shepard lagging just a few steps behind.

"God damn it!" Kim griped to himself, as he raised his hand cannon and aimed it down the corridor. Possessing the wherewithal of a seasoned veteran, Gordon dove to the ground, behind a lounging couch, just as three thunderous rounds erupted from the sidearm's powerful barrel. POW! POW! POW! The rounds resonated within the confined space with explosive percussive force. Their sound blared painfully in Cameron's ear, leaving her momentarily deaf, and her ears ringing. He was so fast on the draw, that the rounds were fired long before she'd had a chance to react. It obviously wasn't that way for Gordon or Shepard, however, as they'd both found cover.

Kim never really expected to hit anything. The shots were meant as more of a deterrent to buy him a little extra time, as he quickly pulled back his gun and rushed towards the elevator - promptly pressing the down button upon reaching it.

Shepard had taken refuge behind a hefty, metallic trash bin, as he glanced over, waiting for the appropriate time to egress. But as he peeked over the bin's covering, he was surprised to see Gordon rashly standing back up, and continuing his pursuit, without waiting.

"Gordon, hold on!" He called out, as he too lept out of cover and followed, now trailing even further back than before.

DING! The elevator chime heralded Kim's escape, as the golden doors

split open, inviting them in with a serene fluorescent light. "Come on!" He demanded, as he stepped onto the elevator platform, dragging Cam in with him. When he turned to press the button and seal the doors, he was admittedly surprised to see this strange man purporting to be Gordon Freeman charging headlong, straight towards the open elevator, only a few feet away now. He had a fire in his eyes - a determination. It was more than courage, more than resolve. It was something he hadn't seen before, and for a brief fleeting moment, it scared him.

The moment passed quickly though, for just as the elevator doors began to slide closed, Kim raised his weapon again and aimed it straight out at Gordon's head. And this time, there was nothing to hide behind. His finger wrapped around the trigger, when suddenlyâ€|

"No!" Cameron screamed, in a panic, as she lunged at Kim, shoving his arm aside, causing his weapon to go off and hit nothing but the upper edge of the inner panel.

"You stupid bitch!" He hollered, incensed - shoving and pinning her hard up against the inside wall, just as the two doors slid shut, and the elevator began its descent. "I had him!"

Not exhibiting even the slightest sign of desist, Gordon reached the elevator doors, and dug his fingertips deep into the small black crevice which separated them. He grunted a little, with a furious sneer on his face, as he forcefully pried the two doors apart. With the two doors to the blackened chasm now opened, Gordon looked down, gazing at the elevator car, as it plummeted into the dark recesses. Knowing it would be too far down in a matter moments, Gordon took a deep breath and took the plunge.

PANG! His hard soled shoes landed on the elevator roof with a resounding thud that caused both Cameron and Kim to gaze up at the ceiling, and gave Cameron a nervy smirk.

Shepard ran up to the dark, gaping, elevator shaft, just a few seconds behind, and looked down. He flinched forward, as his initial reaction was to jump after Gordon, but by the time he'd reached the gap, it was already too far down.

"Damn itâ€|" He muttered to himself, as he looked down at the at the browned haired figure riding the falling elevator. "Gordon!" He called out, getting the physicists attention, as the light from his visor shone back up at him. "Watch yourself!"

Gordon nodded and reassured Shepard with a resolute grin. Just then, before Shepard could pull himself away from the doorway, he heard a loud, rapid pounding - like the stomps from a charging bull. John spun himself around, just in time to see the bright green crest of krogan in blood pack armor verge upon him, and send him flying straight into the darkened abyss.

"ARGH!" The Commander groaned in pain, as his spine hit a network of steel support structures, on the opposite wall. Gordon looked up, in shock, to see his friend tumble down, within the shaft, before managing to snag himself, with his arm, on one of the beams.

"John!" Gordon called out, horrified, as he watched the Commander

clinging to the inner wall, for dear life.

POW! POW! POW! His concerns for his comrade were cut short however, as three powerful gunshots exploded from within the elevator car, piercing the roof with sizeable holes, and forcing Gordon to back away to the very edge of the roof.

"Having yourself a nice ride up there?! Huh?!" Kim yelled out, nearly on the brink of lunacy, as he aimed his impressive sidearm at the ceiling of elevator, with his other arm wrapped tightly around Cameron's throat, while he continued to fire wildly. POW! POW! "You like that?!" POW!

The shots riddled the ceiling of the elevator, forcing Gordon to dance around its narrow roof in an attempt to dodge the blind gunfire. Sparks erupted within the shaft, as rounds ricocheted off of the elevator's metallic inner workings. One of the shots actually ricocheted close enough to Shepard's face, that the shredded steel shavings from the nearby beam burned his cheek, as he dangled there. Thanks to the shotgun's nylon strap, which he had slipped around his neck and shoulder, he managed to keep a hold of the weapon he was given.

But just then, as the thick outline of the elevator faded into the depths of the shaft, another shape contrarily made its way upwards, towards him. It was the massive elevator counter-weight, and it sliced its way up, with surprising speed, and with him directly in its path. John tightened his grip on the metal beam which had been supporting him, as he looked for a foothold on something. He found a small ledge within the metal frame work, and just as the massive counterweight sped its way up, he leapt to the adjacent wall, the instant before he could be crushed. The counterweight breezed by him, leaving him intact for now, but he was still in the precarious position of dangling several stories above a deadly drop.

Shepard shimmied across the shaft, making his way towards a sealed pair of elevator doors nestled within the neighboring wall. The lack of a proper foothold, and the pain strumming through his arm and leg from the bullet wounds he received earlier proved to compound the difficulty of this task. But after a brief struggle, John finally reached the other side, and dug his fingers into the seam between the doors. He sighed and grit his teeth, as he slowly began to separate them. "Hngh!" He groaned to open it, as it proved a bit more difficult than he expected, but again, after a brief effort, the doors were open.

No sooner had he allowed himself a moment to breath, when a sudden jolt of pain shot through his spine, like the kick from a mule. "HUMPH!" He grunted in pain, as he was sent flying, face first, to the ground, when Kargas swung out of the shaft, before planting his hefty feet on the ground at the edge of the doorway.

The elevator rattled a bit, as it touched ground on the ship's bottom floor. Kim kept his weapon aimed up at the ceiling, whipping it around in an attempt zero-in on the unwelcome passenger. He could make out some clatter on the roof, but he couldn't nail it down. Ding! A second later, the chime ushered the doors open. Rather than waste time and ammo here, he took a firm grip of his hostage, and bolted out of the confines of the elevator cabin.

"Come on!" He hissed, practically carrying Cameron along with him, as he moved into the loading bay. Before going far, he came to abrupt halt when he beheld the ruinous state of the the deck. When he was in here just a day earlier, everything was nice and tidy - the aquapod vehicles were lined up in neat rows, and all the tools, supplies, and recreational amenities were stored in shelves, cabinets, and lockers around the walls. But now, it looked like a tornado had quite literally torn through the area. Anything that wasn't bolted down had seemingly accumulated at the passage that led to the smaller cargo ship, which was still latched onto the Illustria's underbelly. The ship that was his intended means of escape. Whatever had done this even managed to scatter the aquapods around, as several of them were no longer in their proper place. Judging by the skid marks left by the trailers they were mounted on, they looked like they'd been dragged around few feet, by some immense vacuum.

Before he could ruminate on it any more, a loud noise snapped him out of his captivated state. PANG! A resounding metallic thud forced Kim to jump, startled, and spin about with his gun aimed into the open elevator. In the split second it had taken him to turn around, a tattered and bruised figure had already dropped into the cabin, and was aiming his own weapon back at the milky-eyed head of security.

"Dr. Freeman!" Cameron exclaimed, with a mixture of relief and elation shining in her eyes, and ringing in her voice.

"Oh, it's youâ€¦!" Kim greeted with an obvious sense of disingenuous cordiality. "Gotta say I'm surprisedâ€¦ And a little relieved, to be honest. I was expecting Shepard."

"I don't wanna have to kill you, but I willâ€¦" Gordon sternly warned, with an impassive, indomitable candor in his voice, as he stepped out of the elevator with his weapon fixed on Kim's head. "Let her go, and walk awayâ€¦"

The doors slid shut behind him. And suddenly, before the exchange could move any further, the entire vessel was shaken by a series of loud, pounding thuds, which echoed across the ship, like something pummeling its sides.

"Nothin' doin' chiefâ€¦" Kim refused, with an adamant shake of his head, as his grip around Cameron's neck and shoulders only tightened. "You hear that?" He asked, as he nodded up towards the ceiling. "That's the sound of the damned Alliance Strike Teams boarding the shipâ€¦ I wouldn't make it five kilometers. Not without some sort of insurance. That's where blondie here comes inâ€¦" He snidely admitted, as he aggressively jerked her back against his body. "So unless you want me to blow her brains out through her ears, I suggest you drop the gunâ€¦ drop the fucking GORDON FREEMAN ACT... And back off!" He demanded, growing noticeably incensed at the ridiculous notion of who this man was purporting to be, as he turned his gun on Cameron - pressing it to her temple. "What's it gonna be?!"

Gordon hesitated for a moment. He thought about dropping the weapon, but if he'd let them go here, she'd die for sure. It was the same scenario with blood pack turian up in the galley all over again. Only this time, he had no ideas. No ace up his sleeve. His eyes began to flicker back and forth as he tried to postulate something, when...

"Ughâ€|!" He heard Cameron gripe, annoyed. "You know, I have just about HAD it with this whole damsel in distress thing!" She grumbled. Just then, with Kim's arm still wrapped tightly around her, she kicked her leg backwards, using her ankle to deliver a damning, on-target blow straight to Kim's groin.

"OOOOH-RRRRGGHHH!" The fog-eyed Commander wailed like a wounded caribou - his knees nearly buckling from the pain as he tried to maintain his hold on his hostage. Being more clever than she sometimes seemed however, she had accounted for this, and actually slipped her way out of the tuxedo jacket she had borrowed from Gordon, leaving Kim writhing in place, holding onto nothing but the black coat, as his prize. Cameron darted away, as fast as she could, leaving the armored officer behind, groaning and exposed. Gordon raised his weapon with Kim's forehead at the end of his crosshairs, and squeezed the trigger. POW! The shot that exploded from the barrel should have conceivably dispatched the villainous Commander, as Gordon aimed at his head, and not his reinforced armor chest plate. But what the round of molten steel found, was a shimmering barrier of blue. As soon as the bullet was harmlessly repelled, Kim's entire body became encased in a set of holographic vestments. It wasn't like the glittering kinetic barriers he'd seen and used before. No. This was just that - a full set of holographic armor that had suddenly encased him. His face became wrapped in what almost appeared to be a luminescent blue helmet, comprised of nothing but light, and it was the same all over his body. Chest, shoulders, leggings, and arms - all were now sheltered by what was an illusory set of intangible luminous shielding.

As Kim's agony and discomfort began to subside, he noticed his omni-tool had come on, and displayed a message:
>[PROTECTORATE VII: LAW ENFORCEMENTURBAN PACIFICATION ARMOR]
>[TECH SHIELDING ENGAGED]
[SHIELD INTEGRITY: 99.96%]

Kim grinned with an odious gleam twinkling in his one eye, as he turned to look back up at Gordon. He raised his head high with a resplendent air, and stretched his arms fully; standing spread eagle, as if to taunt and say "Come on, give me your best shot."

Gordon got the message loud and clear, and there was no room for hesitation. He swallowed back his uncertainty and raised his underpowered sidearm once more, squeezing the trigger to fire round after round. POW! POW! POW!

"I can do this all day!" Kim professed over the sound of gunfire, with a gleeful show of hubris, never flinching once.

POW! POW! POW! POW! CLICK!

His fusillade abruptly fizzled out, when his weapon refused to yield any further shots. Normally, his suit would have warned him, but he'd almost forgotten he didn't have that advantage today.

"Aww, all out chiefâ€|?" Kim snidely snickered, purporting a deceitful empathy, as he let his arms drop to the side. "That's too bad. Welpâ€|" He he continued with an arrogant shrug, as he nonchalantly raised and pointed his own weapon. "Guess it's my turn!"

Gordon dove to his left just as a rapidfire battery of hellfire was unleashed in his direction. Kim's aim traced the fleeing physicist's movements, blazing a trail of bullet pocks along the wall, which nearly nipped at his backside. Just before the trail of gunfire could catch up with him, Gordon dove behind one of the large, unmanned aquapods, pressing his back against it for sanctuary.

"Oh, come on! Gordon Freeman's gonna hide now?!" Kim patronized, with a nefarious chuckle, as he flicked a selector switch on the side of his prized and powerful weapon from rapid fire to high-explosive. "Didn't I read somewhere that Gordon Freeman was supposed to be bulletproof, or some shit like that?!"

"Wellâ€¦" He continued to mock, as he raised his weapon back up and took aim at the aquapod, which was undoubtedly still sheltering the phony Freeman, as he had not been seen running out the other side. "Let's see if Mr. Gordon Freeman can survive this!" Pow! His weapon went off, and a split second later, BOOM! The entire frame of the recreational aquapod exploded into a raging, orange, conflagration of flame and debris - an inferno which would have consumed and obliterated any soul unfortunate enough to be standing near itâ€¦

* * *

><p>"HHRAH!" "HUMPH!" Kargas roared, and Shepard bayed in agony, as he was sent rolling across the floor; having been brutally kicked in the gut.<p>

"RRAGH!" The krogan snarled again, as he ran up to the ailing Shepard only to deliver his foot, once more, into the Commander's side, as if he were kicking an idle soccer ball. And much like a soccer ball, John was sent tumbling and rolling across the hard, vinyl floor of this new deck. His abdomen throbbed with sharp, stabbing spasms of pain, and he coughed and gasped as the very air had been kicked out of his lungs. As he tried to rise to all fours, his blurred vision focused on a crimson dot on the floor beneath his face. A dot which became two, and then three, as a small trickle of blood dripped from his mouth, without his realization.

Just then, he heard the familiar stomping clods of the krogan charging him again. This time, in spite of the disorientation, John had the presence of mind to know what was coming. The instant before the next punt could land, Shepard shot up and rolled into a forward somersault, allowing Kargas to miss and kick nothing but the air. Using the krogan's own momentum against him, John spun around and swept the his tree-trunk legs out from under him, causing him to topple forward, like a crumbling sky-scraper.

The Commander shot back to his feet, and when he felt the heavy weight of a thick strap tearing at his shoulder, he realized he was still in possession of a shotgun. By the time John pulled it up and aimed it - the surprisingly spry Kargas was already back to his feet, reciprocating the gesture with a formidable, one-handed shotgun of his own.

"Hmhmhmhmphâ€¦" Kargas cackled under his breath. His reptilian grin beamed, as the two stood poised to kill each other in a powder keg standoff. "You can't imagine how much I've dreamed of this moment, Shepardâ€¦" He admitted, with his weapon brandished in a lax, one-handed grip.

"Listenâ€¦" The Commander replied in a sober, austere tone. "I understand your anger. But we don't have to do thisâ€¦! Why don't we put our weapons down, and we can discuss this like sensible beingsâ€¦"

"Sensible beings?! Hah!" The krogan scoffed. "Sensibility has no place in the hearts of men like you and Iâ€¦" He affirmed. He sneered a bit, just then. His nostrils flared up - taking in several deep whiffs, as if having caught wind of a peculiar aroma.

"You have the scent of blood about youâ€¦" Kargas declared, with his brow furrowed in anger. "The kind of smell that never washes offâ€¦"

"You've killed many times, Shepard." He added. "Tell meâ€¦ Does it ever weigh on you...? Do you ever think about all those you've slaughtered and killed?"

"Yes, I do." John retorted, without qualm. "Every time I close my eyesâ€¦ Every time I'm alone with my own thoughtsâ€¦" He affirmed with a somber eyed candor. "But every life I've taken, I've done so because they left me NO other choice. I've only ever killed when it was absolutely necessary. When there was no other alternative!" He pointedly asserted. "And I've never taken any joy or solace doing soâ€¦"

"Ah, but what about the lives that you didn't personally take?" The krogan queried. "Like the millions of stillborn or miscarried krogan that will never be, because of you. Because you've taken it upon yourself eradicate my entire species! Do those lives weigh on you, as well, Shepard?!" He demanded, with a gathering ferocity. "Do you see those little krogan - their tiny hands reaching out to you whenever you close your eyes?!"

"Yes I do!" Shepard barked back, in response - his own anger frothing to a boiling point. "And believe me when I say that nobody thinks the krogan deserve a cure for the genophage, more than me! But what clan Weyrloc was developing wasn't a cureâ€¦ It was a weapon!" He emphatically affirmed. "I tried to reason with them! I talked to Weyrloc's clanspeaker myself, but he wouldn't listen. None of them would!" He proclaimed - his eyes attempting to plead and bargain with the krogan's. "If you want a cure, this isn't the way to do it... I can help you! We can find a better way!"

"Enough of your lies!" The green fleshed krogan snarled, as he drew back his weapon, and engaged the safety. "I'll hear no moreâ€¦" He avowed, as he actually began to dismantle the weapon piece by piece. "I want you to show meâ€¦ Show me you are worthy of your Command." He challenged, as the disassembled pieces fell to the floor, with a series of metallic pings and pangs, while Shepard looked on, perplexed. "Show me why you are the most feared man in the galaxy, and why the Reapers themselves fell scattered at your feet!" The barrel and part of the hilt were the last two pieces in Kargas' grasp. The last two pieces which he gripped tightly, before tossing aside, like trash, and taking a closed-fist battle stance.

"I don't want to fight you!"

"You have no choiceâ€¦!" The krogan warrior began again, as he raised

his wrecking ball fists up to his face, like a boxer ready to go 12 rounds. "Unless you intend to shoot an unarmed krogan, the only way you're going to stop me is by defeating me hand to hand... Because I won't surrender to youâ€¦ Nor will I stop until one of us is dead!"

As he maintained his aim on the hulking reptile, the thought of squeezing the shotgun trigger crossed John's mind for just a moment. But even though it was clear that this krogan meant him death, he couldn't bring himself to shoot an unarmed adversary. Shepard bit down on his clenched lips, as he reluctantly lowered his weapon. He exhaled a dismal sigh, as he raised the strap up, over his head, before finally tossing the still loaded firearm aside.

"Always the hard wayâ€¦" He muttered to himself, with a sigh, as he raised his hands and readied himself for combat. Kargas' throat rumbled with anticipation, as his eyes narrowed. They stared each other down for a second - sizing one another up when the moment of tense tranquility was suddenly broken. The two monuments of power took off - charging each other simultaneously, like a pair of wanton drivers careening towards each other in a chicken joust.

40. Chapter 40: Battle For The Illustria V

****Salvation: Episode I - The Taking of the Carmenta Illustria****

Disclaimer: This fan-fiction is part of an episodic series taking place after Salvation: A Half-Life/Mass Effect Universe Fan Fiction, which will lead directly to its sequel, Salvation II: Project Prometheus. These episodes and sequel take place OUTSIDE of the Mass Effect 3 continuity. Characters property of their respective companies, Half-Life created by Valve and Mass Effect created by Bioware.

****Chapter 40: Battle for the Illustria (Part V)****

****Vendetta****

It was as if a cloud of shadows draped over her eyes had been slowly pulled away, when Miranda looked up at the silvery ceiling, and saw a lavender veiled figure standing over her. Her blurred and faded vision had slowly come back into focus, but the blare of gunfire left a latent ringing in her ears. Nonetheless, as she laid there, on her back, the newfound silence and tranquility was most welcome.

"Is this bloody vacation over yetâ€¦?" Miranda asked, in a groaning, creaky voice akin to that of a child who does not wish to get out of bed in the morning, while glancing up at Tali.

Tali's chest jolted with a chuckle, as all she could do was laugh - too exhausted herself to reply. She stretched her hand down to Miranda, who weakly took it in turn. A combined effort on both their parts, and Miranda staggered back to her feet, on wobbly, shaky legs.

The brunette peered through the windows, at the mighty, benevolent structure gracefully hanging in a lavender, watercolored sky, directly before them. Vessels of all shapes and sizes, manned by

every species of the galaxy swarmed around the gargantuan beehive that was the Citadel - several of them finding their way towards the now idle Illustria. Pounding thuds continued to resonate across the ship, as small military strike team vessels latched on, preparing to retake the ship from its hostile abductors.

"You did it, Tali!" Miranda uttered, in relief, as they realized their fight was over.

"No, I'd say we did it, Miranda!" Tali rebutted.

As the soft lilac luminance from the Citadel Sky spilled in through the window, embracing them both, Miranda turned to face Tali. Just then, she did something she couldn't remember ever having done before. She smiled at her. And even though Miranda couldn't see it, Tali smiled back. Their humble grins were short lived, however, as they were suddenly interrupted by the soft sound of someone weeping in lament.

Far back, in a shadowy corner of the bridge - in the one place that the bright, auspicious light failed to reach - a lone quarian in a burgundy viel sat curled up on the floor. His forehead was buried into his knees, with his arms wrapped around them, as his body trembled and quivered with every weeping whimper he gave. And as he heard the two sets of footsteps approaching him, he looked up to reveal his cracked visor. A small gap, no more than half an inch in width, revealed his glazed over right eye, and tear soaked right cheek, under the mask.

"Oh!" Miranda said, with a mixture of shock and strangely enough, remorse, as she beheld the tragic quarian. "What? What do we do with him?" She beckoned, turning to Tali.

"Just leave me!" Leahr was the one who abruptly responded - his voice trembling with heartache, as he re-buried his face into his knees. "I'm dead anyway!" He sniffled. "My suit's been breached. I've already been exposed... And it's for the best!" He shouted in an anguished rage. "Dying here is the best I could've hoped for! Better than having to live with what I almost did!"

The two women simply stood there for a moment, at a loss for words. Even though he nearly killed them, neither could help but feel sorry for this grieving, empty shell of a being.

Just then, Tali's pity turned to conviction. "Oh no, you don't!" She asserted, sneering under her mask, as she dug into one of her suit's many pockets to pull out a small, metal canister, with a spray nozzle. "You're not getting off that easily!" She ordained, as she rushed over and crouched down before him. She hooked his face by the metallic fixture surrounding his mouthpiece, and lifted his head up; pushing it back against the wall.

"Wh-what are you doing?!" He entreated, as he watched her raise the small canister directly to his face - namely to the crack in his mask.

"Saving your life!" She asserted, as the cannister hissed. She traced the crack on his helmet with it - squirting out a clear, thick, gel resin which sealed up the breach.

"No! No, you can't!" He implored, wanting to break free, but lacking the spirit or will to do so. "You can't! They'll exile me!"

"Of course they'll exile you!" Tali reviled, finishing with the canister, and summoning her omni-tool. "And it's what you deserve!" She affirmed, as she raised the omni to the beaded globules of fresh resin on his mask.

"No, please! Please, I'd rather die!" He sobbed - tears flooding from his eyes as a fanned out beam of light washed over his mask, from Tali's omni-tool. The warm, orange beam buzzed - systematically sweeping back and forth over his mask. The energy from the beam slowly started to smooth the resin out, creating a seamless, permanent seal.

"Keelah, just let me die! Don't let her do this!" He pleaded, as his eyes turned up to the black-haired human.

It did actually pain Miranda to see him like this. But his fate was better left in the hands of another quarian.

"Don't you understandâ€¦!" He begged of Tali once more, after receiving no clemency from the human. "Our people have a home nowâ€¦ All I ever wanted to do was see itâ€¦ And now, I'll never get tooâ€¦!"

"No, you won'tâ€¦" She replied, in a hushed, deadpan tone, as she finished with her work with the omni-tool, leaving his faceplate smooth, and flawless, save for some mild discoloration along the line where crack once was. Nearly finished, she removed a large, antibiotic syringe from another pocket on her suit, and injected the needle directly into his arm, through a specialized port included in all quarian outfits.

With her work done, she discarded the empty syringe and stood back up, leaving Leahr a sobbing puddle on the floor. His head drooped to one side, and his arms rested flaccidly on the floor, as he wept for his rueful fate.

"My godâ€¦" Miranda uttered, as she observed his accursed state of existence. "Is being exiled really so terribleâ€¦?"

"Quarians don't really have the resources for lengthy imprisonments." Tali explained, trying hard to maintain an emotionless, austere tone - but a small tinge of empathy seeped its way through. "Most severe crimes are punished by either execution or exile. And exile is the worst thing that can happen to a quarianâ€¦"

"We're already considered outcasts by most of the galaxy." She continued, as she bowed and shook her head. "Now he'll be forever branded an outcast among his own peopleâ€¦ And at a time when we have a homeworld again, he'll never live to see a day when he will set a single foot upon itâ€¦ He'll never reach Rannochâ€¦"

An mournful silence hung in the room, interrupted only by the doleful sound of his sobbing whimpers. Even the ship had gone silent - hanging still in the Citadel sky - its engines dead, its instruments inert.

But like most moments of tranquility for the Normandy team, this one

was quickly shattered.

"HOLD IT!" A gruff, boisterous male voice shouted out, as a group of men, clad in black and gray Alliance tactical armor stormed in the room - assault rifles primed and brandished. They flooded in and fanned out across the room, surrounding it within a matter of seconds, as their laden metal boots trampled the destroyed mech parts, like a group of people wading through a field of aluminum cans.

"Well it's about bloody time!" Miranda chided, as the armored infantrymen seized the bridge.

"Put your hands up!"

"Oh, you've got to be joking!" She groaned, at gunpoint, with a roll of her eyes.

"Hold it. Stand down, marines!" A voice with the presence of Command addressed, from out in the hall. Suddenly, each of the armored and helmeted soldiers that had stormed in the room stood at attention, and cleared a path for a man who was the obvious superior.

The tall figure stepped onto the bridge, wearing a set of bright blue armor, that contrasted with the dismal gray of his subordinates' He walked with a confident stride, and an air of diligence about him, as he stepped up to the two battered women standing in the center.

Tali thought there was something familiar about this man. Something familiar about the way he moved, the way he carried himself, but since he, much like herself, was hiding his face beneath a helmet, she couldn't place it.

"Well, I'd recognize that scrappy quarian anywhere." The Commanding Officer at the fore greeted with an amicable tone, which was slightly modulated by his helmet's comm, as he placed his hands akimbo on his hips. "Hello, Tali! It's been a long time."

* * *

><p>It was the same everywhere else. Throughout the entire infrastructure of the once grandiose Carmenta Illustria, Alliance Strike teams boarded through makeshift entryways they'd cut into the hull, from various insertion points. Counter-terrorism teams flooded in, thorough yet rapid, as they proceeded to check each room for hostiles.<p>

One such team poured into the ruined and devastated Promenade Deck, just as the last few remnants of a renegade security force were pacified. Garrus; a well known member of Shepard's team, as well as a greatly recognized former member of C-Sec, seemed to be the one who undertook the task of greeting the Alliance teams, and explaining the situation.

Those officers fortunate enough to still have their lives were all taken into custody. Most went peacefully, but there were a rebellious few who thought one last attempt at escape might prove fruitful. It didn't - as they found themselves clambering for the exits, only to wind up in the awaiting arms of the authority. At this point, they seemed willing to try anything that would get them off the hook -

even if it meant swearing their innocence.

"Hey, now wait a minute! Listen, you got the wrong guy!" A young turian who'd just been taken into custody proclaimed, as a pair of Alliance Marines dragged him towards the exit, along with a line of other fellow ne'er do-wells. "Talk to Garrus Vakarian! He'll tell you! I actually helped to stop all this! I'm innocent!"

"Yeah, I had nothing to do with this either!" A flagrantly fibbing salarian spouted out, from behind Zee, as they were both carted away, out of Garrus' earsreach. "Let me go! I'm innocent too!"

"Shut up, no you're not!" Zee yelled back, over his shoulder.

In the midst of the debacle, a dessert cart nestled against one of the Promenade Deck's walls, and still draped with a silky white cloth over it, began to shuffle a bit. A stubby, little, three fingered hand emerged from under the cloth, and began pushing against the floor, like a rower on a canoe, forcing the cart to roll along the wall. Suddenly, it came to an abrupt stop, as it bumped into an obstacle.

"Blast!" A voice gripped from under the cloth of the dessert cart, as Tarrik poked his head out, to have a look. Much to his surprise, he found that the obstacle that had impeded his movement, was none other than a mound of black duffle bags. He gasped for air, as he immediately threw his hands over one, to undo the zipper. A shower of golden radiance lit up his face, from the sparkingly jewelry and valuables. Earrings, necklaces, gold watches, credit chits - a mother lode of gold, a treasure trove of treasure, all quite literally at his fingertips.

"Hehâ€| Hehehehe!" He laughed to himself, sounding a little unhinged, as he dug his hands deep into the filled up bag - feeling the fortune he so rightly deserved between his fingers. He quickly looked around, almost having had forgotten the presence of the armed soldiers. Luckily, none of them was focusing on him. He looked aheadâ€| A back door was just a few feet away. And it wasn't being guarded...Taking another hasty look around to make sure he wasn't being watched, Tarrik zipped the bag back up, and hooked the strap over his head, and around his shoulder. There were eight bags total. All of them brimming with wealth. He grabbed a second bag by the strap, and hooked it around himself.

"Surely this is enough."_ He thought to himself, for a moment, before quickly shaking his head, and grabbing another.

* * *

><p>A thick layer of mist, from the fire suppression system that smothered the flames of the aquapod bonfire, had already settled into the loading bay. But this particular smokescreen would quickly be banished, as a sinewy arm reached out to a large, grey, metallic control panel on the wall - particularly for a green switch that read: ventilation exhaust. A boisterous hum rumbled within the room, as several large fans integrated into the ceiling kicked in and swiftly began to expel the lingering fog in the room. It took only a matter of seconds, before the ship's air filtration system had completely exorcised the loading bay from its thick, grey blanket.<p>

"Hmphâ€|" Kim chuckled, as he flicked the switch back off, shutting down the filtration system. The sound of the spinning blades curtailed, before coming to a stop all together. As the dismal cloud cover was vanquished, it revealed the charred and erupted remains of an obliterated aquapod. The milky-eyed Security Commander grinned as he strolled to the smouldering wreckage - a brash air about him.

"Well, I guess they don't make war legends like they used toâ€|" He muttered aloud, though not speaking to anyone in particular. As his kinetic shielding lightly flickered and pulsed, in the dimly lit bowels of the ship, it almost seemed to surround him with a blue corona of light. He reached the demolished framework of the aquapod, that would never again see the open seas, of worlds across the galaxy, and he walked around it, to the other side where he'd seen his persistent nemesis take refuge. The door from the pod had been completely blown off, and it laid on the floor now, next to the smoking refuse mound of the main structure; charred and black. He was expecting to find at least a burnt body, or perhaps the sizzling remains of a charred skeleton. But there was no corpse here. Stillâ€| He didn't really entertain the notion that this supposed 'Free Man' may have survived. Such a thing was absurd, he told himself. But just then, as he poked at the smouldering scrap heap with his foot, digging for some sign of human remains, he stumbled upon something disheartening. With a grimace, he quickly kicked aside the blown off door, to reveal a gaping hole underneath. Or, to be more precise, a gaping drainage ductâ€|

On the opposite end of the loading bay, the grate to a separate drain was slowly and cautiously lifted out of place, from below, and quietly pushed aside. Two hands reached up, gripped the edge of the hole, and Gordon pulled himself up, into a crouched, hunkered down position, on the floor, like a hunter on the prowl. He took a quick survey of area, and found that he had emerged in a narrow aisle between two aquapods. More than that, he was also serendipitous enough to spot the familiar silhouette of a blonde haired reporter, in a blue dress, cowering behind one of the trailers, as she looked out towards the smoking wreckage of the destroyed pod. She had her back towards Gordon, not even remotely aware of his presence. Her hands were balled up into tight fists, which she nestled close to her chest, and her eyes were red, and swelling with tears.

"Noâ€|!" Cameron whimpered softly, to herself, as she shook her head in denial. "He can't be dead!"

All of a sudden, a powerful hand reached around and cupped itself around her mouth, silencing her before she could shriek, as she was dragged backwards, into the shadows.

"Mmmm! Mmmph!"

"Shhhh!" Gordon shushed, trying to quell her panicked whimpers, with a finger pressed vertically against his lips. She looked up at Gordon, with wide-eyed disbelief, as he slowly pulled his hand from her mouth.

"You're alive!" She exclaimed in a hushed voice, that teemed with glee. Unable to contain her own jubilation, she lunged forward, and threw her arms around him, in a tight and unexpected embrace,

exacerbating the pain from his injuries.

"Mmph!" He let out a quiet groan, instinctively pushing her away, as his face reflected his agony.

"Ohâ€¦ I'm sorry!" She confessed, daintily lining the tips of her fingers across her bottom lip, as she retracted herself to kneel by his side. "Butâ€¦ How are you still alive?! I saw you get-"

"Nevermind." Gordon interjected, with a dismissive headshake, abruptly cutting Cameron off. "Listen. Whatever happens, I need you to stay here, and keep out of sight."

"What are you going to do?"

"What else? I'm gonna try and stop this guy." Gordon affirmed, without equivocation, as he peered through the metal framework of the trailer holding up the aquapod, to observe Kim looking in all directions, with a newfound state of guardedness. "Captain Ryback seemed like a good man, and he killed him like he was nothing. Somebody's gotta make him answer for that."

"Oh, be carefulâ€¦!" She urged, with a sincere timber of concern and compassion ringing in her voice. "He seems impervious with that armor of hisâ€¦"

"Yeah, wellâ€¦ I'll think of something." He hesitantly admitted, as he maneuvered his way around the aquapod, towards the center of the loading bay, still keeping low to the ground.

* * *

><p>Shepard's back was slammed, with bone rattling force, against a wall within the corridor leading away from the elevators they'd emerged from. The area was brightly lit, and the wall was adorned with a holographic mural of a sunny beach, with playful, dancing cartoon crabs, seagulls, and other non-earthly caricaturizations. A glowing blue sign above his head read: Lockers - Men. And another one, just below that, with an arrow pointing the way ahead read: To Lido Deck.<p>

The throbbing in Shepard's spine was quickly overcast by the sudden, harrowing blows he felt drilling into the side of his gut. Kargas hammered away at John's abdomen, causing him to grunt and cough in agony, with each powerful blow hoisting him off his feet. The Commander intercepted the proceeding strike, swatting the krogan's jackhammer fist away, and retaliating with punch of his own. Shepard lashed out, with a fury, delivering a stinging left hook into Kargas' face - the only part that wasn't protected by armor. Obviously feeling the poignant bite of the blow, Kargas reeled back a step, allowing Shepard to step away from the wall, only to deliver another hard shot. A right hook, then a left; John swung with a fury, delivering a battery of jabs into the green-fleshed krogan's face, as if it were a speed-bag.

With the mighty mercenary reeling, the Commander swung a ferocious downward hammer, leaving the krogan wobbling, with his bleeding face turned down towards the floor. Seizing the opportunity, John rushed in and took hold of the back of Kargas' plated head, forcing it down

toward the ground as he swung a stiff knee up, against it. Before John's destructive patella could smash Kargas' face in, the krogan crossed his hands in front of it, effectively blocking the blow and absorbing the impact. Again and again, John pushed down on the krogan's head, as he held him bent over before him, trying to land at least one successful knee kick. But he could not break through Kargas' block.

Instead, Kargas shoved the knee away and exploded back to an upright position, with uncanny power - using the back of his own naturally armor plated skull to clock Shepard on the jaw. John stumbled backwards, in a starry-eyed daze, before toppling to the floor, like a drunkard. Kargas grinned as he looked down at his wounded prey. He lunged forth, grabbing Shepard by the neck to drag him up to his feet. Quickly regaining his composure, John reached out, and snatched a fistful of the krogan's throat - constricting his windpipe in a wrenching, pincer-like grip.

"Ack-gh!" Kargas gagged, as he felt his breathing suddenly cease. He looked into Shepard's dusky blue eyes, and was greeted with an angered, unrelenting bravado, as he felt Shepard's grip tighten further - as unbelievable as that was. This man seemed to possess strength and determination that he once thought innate to only krogan kind. But he would not lose this day. Feeling the onsets of asphyxia setting in, and his own strength beginning to wane, Kargas reached up, and wrapped his hand around Shepard's arm, where he'd noticed a bandaged wound, digging his thumb firmly into a permeated red stain, as if it were a big red button.

"ARRRRGGHHH!" Shepard cringed and cried out in agony, clenching his eyes, gritting his teeth, and throwing his head back, as he released Kargas' throat - the torment too much to bear. In turn, he took hold of Kargas' wrist, and tried desperately to pry the krogan's hand from its torturous hold on his arm.

But Kargas took an even firmer grip on the injured limb, causing him to rale in anguish, as he spun him around, and heaved him off his feet, only to slam him, face first, into the ground.

"Nnghâ€¦! Urghâ€¦!" Shepard sputtered and coughed, letting out a harrowing series of guttural creaks and groans, as he squirmed around on the floor.

The reptilian assailant looked down - an odious glee shining in his eyes, as he watched Shepard cough up blood. But just as the edges of his lips began to curl up into a smile, he watched the dauntless, and impossibly intrepid little human, plant his hands on the ground, and begin to struggle back to his feet.

"You're everything I thought you'd be, Shepardâ€¦!" Kargas admitted, as he reached down and grabbed the Commander by the back of the neck. "They say your spirit is unbreakableâ€¦! Fortunately for me- Hngh!" He grunted a bit, as he spoke - hoisting a nearly dead-weight Shepard up off the ground. Like a power-lifter in a bodybuilding competition, he raised the dazed human high up, over his head, and spotted a sharp, protruding corner jutting from the nearby wall, where the women's lockers ended, on the opposite end of the hall. "-Your spirit isn't what I intend to BREAK!" He snarled, as he hurled the flaccid human, spine first, into the sharp corner, which might as well have been a razor's edge.

"ARRGGHH-UGGHHH!" Shepard cried out in anguish, writhing and squirming, as he ricocheted off the corner, and plopped down onto the floor, with his back arched up in agony. His face was perpetuated with torment, as rivers of sweat flooded into his tightly clenched eye sockets, and off his cheeks.

The pain that surged through his body dulled everything else. At that moment, he wasn't on a cruise ship, he wasn't fighting a krogan, he wasn't even human anymore. He was nothing but a hand in a flame, an eyeball in a shower of acid. He was agony incarnate. But as his pain sensors flared to a point that was beyond unbearable - a vision pulled him back. Somewhere in the depths of his clenched eyelids, he saw the source of his valor and perseverance.

"Tali!" He hissed to himself, through clenched teeth, as he pried his eyes open once more. Ignoring the pain would be like ignoring one's own chair on fire. It was excruciating. But for her, he'd sit on the flame. The first thing he did was kick his legs out. Good! He could still feel them. They could still move. He turned to look up the jaded-pale face of the krogan standing before him, who reciprocated his gaze with a look of utter and completely disbelief.

John rolled onto his side, begging his arms and legs for the strength to push himself up. Every motion he made was a new twinge of pain. But he would give no quarter, as he slowly staggered back to his feet!

* * *

><p>Kim walked down the long pathway that divided the deck in two - a pathway leading directly to the hole cut in the main loading bay door, and the tiny cargo ship still latched on; piggybacking on the back of the *Illustria*. He swiveled his head, back and forth, with his formidable firearm primed in his hand, as his armor beamed in the shadowy room, like a lightning bug. The aquapods were thronged across the floor, on both sides, and he kept his eye narrow and sharp for the faintest signs of movement.<p>

"Alright, freak!" He shouted, clearly growing impatient. "I get it! You can climb through vents, and crawl around in the sewers! What? Is that supposed to suddenly make me believe you really are Gordon Freeman?!" He entreated, with a condescending snicker. "Huh?! Come on, what are you? Some kinda mute?! Say something!"

Clink.

A sudden nearby clang startled him, spinning him about like a helicopter blade, with his pistol aimed. Nothing there! His eye darted back and forth, as a chill shuddered his body.

"I'll give you this!" He shouted to the air again, keeping his senses keen. "You and your pal Shepard REALLY fucked up a good thing, you know that?! I deserved this, damn it!" He perpetuated, as he shuffled along, moving from pod to pod, checking underneath. "You have no idea how long we've been planning this... How much time and effort I've put it into it! I earned that money!"

Kim's luminescent armor sparkled in the dull room like a torch in a

catacomb. And unbeknownst to him, his movements were closely being followed.

"You know what it took to get an entire security team on-board with this whole thing?" He shouted in query - perhaps hoping to illicit a response that would force Gordon to give himself away. "It isn't like they were instantly in on it, you know...? No, I had to open their eyes slowly... Make 'em see the goldmine we were sitting onâ€|"

Gordon followed Kim, staying one pod behind him at all times, mostly ignoring the drivel. When he saw him stop in the center of the aisle, and start monologuing again, he got an idea. He looked up at a small access ladder mounted onto the rear of the aquapods, that led up to their roofs - each one was equipped with such a ladder. He slipped his pistol into his pocket and ascended up as quickly and quietly as he could. He knew kinetic barriers worked by creating a repulsive shield around a protected body - but the created shield had a space of about three inches between the carrier's person and the barrier boundary - like a cocoon. The idea was, if he could get close enough to this man to deliver a point black shot, literally barrel to flesh, the kinetic barriers and hopefully this strange new shielding, would be rendered useless.

"Yeah, I'd have 'em over on the weekends for a ballgame and a beer." Kim soliloquied, with a shrug. "Toss in a joke, here and there, about what it'd be like if we hijacked the ship - you know, to gauge their reactions. Before they knew it, it wasn't a joke anymore... It was a plan. A mission! I hand picked the ones that were receptive to the idea... The ones that were willing to take the risk. It took weeks of planning... Months! But you and that Alliance pissant, Shepard - you had to go and ruin it allâ€|"

At that moment, out of the corner of his eye, he spotted a very vague, yet very distinct reflection in the windshield of the aquapod beside him. It was the reflection of a figure in a lit up visor, scaling the pod directly behind him, and rising to a pouncing position.

"You know what, freakâ€|?" He called into the wind once more, not letting on that he was privy to the Free Man's presence. "I'm gonna find you... I'm gonna KILL you...! And then when I'm done, I'm gonna take that little blonde haired bimbo as my consolation prize! What do you think of THAT?!" He shouted, as he spun around, weapon in hand, aiming up at Gordon. POW! POW! Two shots ricocheted off the steel framework in the ceiling, as Freeman dropped to his stomach, for cover. POW! POW! POW! Another three shots glanced off of the pod's rounded exterior, just shy of Gordon's forehead. Freeman bent his legs, reeling himself back, as he pressed his feet against the top rung of the ladder. Using it as a springboard, he leapt to a vertical base, and dove onto Kim like an Eagle swooping into a lake, for a meal. POW! The milky-eyed transgressor got off one final shot, which only managed to burn a grazing, superficial wound into the side of Freeman's hip. To two men tumbled to the ground, under Gordon's weight, as Kim's magnificent sidearm slid a few feet away, across the steel floor.

The two wrestled on the ground, with ferocity - each vying for physical dominion over the other. They rolled end over end, over each other; punching and kicking, gouging and scratching. And the noises they made were a testosterone driven cacophony of grunts and groans. "Umph!" "Urgh!" "Mother fucker, I'll kill you!"

Gordon rapidly moved to free the pistol from his pocket, but an unexpected snag on the inner lining impeded this for just a second. With a hasty jerk, he tore it out of his pocket, ripping part of the lining out with it, as he raised it and tried to press it against Kim's head. The bellicose Commander quickly fathomed the gravity of the attempt, and intercepted Gordon's aim with his own hands. He clutched at Gordon's wrist, keeping the gun away from his head, while Gordon struggled to do the opposite.

Their arms trembled, and they both clenched their teeth to the point of shattering them, as Gordon wrestled with a fervor to force the weapon down. Kim quickly realised that this man, purporting to be some sort of historical war hero, was a lot stronger than he looked. Still locked in their stalemate, Kim shifted his weight, tossing his arms, and rolling them both onto their sides.

Still engaged, they continued to vie for control of the weapon, only this time, Kim had the floor as his advantage. With Gordon's wrist still locked firmly in his grasp, the one-eyed Commander raised Freeman's hands up, only to slam them down against the cold, hard floor, in an effort to jar the weapon free. Again, up then down. Poom! Poom! The thuds got louder and louder, as Gordon's knuckles painfully crunched against the floor, his grip ebbing a bit more with each blow. With one strike, poom! then POW! The handgun went off, about six inches away from the Commander's ethereally armored forehead. It wasn't close enough, as the round rippled against his shields, and ricocheted away, lodging itself into one of the nearby steel support beams. Poom, another slam against the ground, and the handgun flew out of Gordon's grip. He quickly dove after it, but in his contested scramble, all he managed to do was knock it further away with his fingertips. He watched it slide away into the casted shadow of the nearest aquapod, with a grimace

Kim rose to his knees, and pinned Gordon down onto his stomach, relentlessly pummelling his back with a series of kidney shots. "Argh! Umph!" Gordon cried out, as he jolted in pain. He pushed himself up, and rolled to one side, swing a wild haymaker, which only just brushed against Kim's chin. Still, in the split second it took the cyclopean Commander to reel back, Gordon scrambled to his knees.

The two lunged for each other again, and in the midst of their violent grapple, they somehow managed to drag each other up to their feet, only to start slamming each other back and forth against the aquapods, in a contest of strength. With his hands dug into the shoulder area around Kim's reinforced armor, Gordon shoved him as hard as he could, ramming him - back first - against one of the aquapod's trailers. Namely, against the small, metal control panels mounted on it. The yellow painted panel was populated with knobs, switches, and a large, important looking lever, which was pushed in when Kim's back drove into it. It was clearly some sort of release mechanism, as a sudden clack heralded a loud mechanical grinding, when the pod suddenly began to roll off the trailer, on a track, like a new car rolling off an assembly line. A thunderous thump shook the floor beneath their feet, as the pod crashed onto the ground, and scraped across the metal deck.

This was obviously the way the pods were lowered into the water, but despite the resonating thump, it fazed neither man. And Kim repaid

Gordon's shove with a drive of his own, forcing the physicist back, like two rams butting heads. He thrust his arms upward, like swinging gates, breaking Gordon's hold on his shoulders. And followed through with a ferocious salvo of swift blows straight into Gordon's mid-section in rapid succession. As Gordon felt the excruciating effects of having his innards being walloped to a paste, he pushed Kim back, and charged in with a few swings of his own. It was pointless to go for the armored parts, so Gordon cracked the war-haggard Commander right across the chin with a stiff left. But when he came in for a right, Kim blocked the blow with his forearm, and locked Gordon's arm beneath his armpit. He then twisted the shoulder upwards, towards the ceiling, causing Gordon to wince in agony, as he felt it preparing to pop right out of the socket. The next thing he felt was the dizzying sting of Kim's savage uppercut to the bottom of his chin.

The attack threw the wary physicist back, sending him crashing, spine first, against the aisle floor.

"Oh, you're gonna get the Krait Viper now, mother fucker!" The one-eyed head of security snarled through gritted teeth, pounding a clenched fist into his palm, as he marched up to Gordon.

As he lunged down to grab Freeman, the nimble physicist pulled his knees back to his chest, coiling himself up like a spring, before kicking both legs up at Kim, with every ounce of strength he could muster.

Taken by surprise, the armored officer plunged backwards, stumbling and tumbling off his feet, as Gordon reciprocally scrambled up to his. Suddenly finding himself on the floor, Kim rolled to one side, in a motion to stand back up - but before doing so, his one keen eye caught sight of the gleaming butt of his favored, elite sidearm, lying directly beside his face. He quickly snatched the pistol off the ground, and rolled onto his back.

"Freeze!" The infuriated officer shouted, clutching his weapon in both hands, and aiming it up at a physicist preparing to pounce - stopping him dead in his tracks.

Staring down the barrel of the menacing handgun, Gordon instinctively screeched to a halt.

"Heh." Kim chortled, with a cockeyed smirk, and a crooked grin, as his thumb turned a holographic selector switch to cryo-rounds. "No, seeâ€¦ I meant that literally!" He mocked, as he suddenly squeezed the trigger.

POW! Gordon flinched, averting his eyes to the muzzle flash, purely on reflex, as he suddenly realized it was over. He was dead. But no, dead men don't feel pain. And what he felt was the excruciating kiss of subzero ice to flesh. He'd instinctively shielded his face from the blast with his left arm - the arm still covered in a silvery cast. But rather than a hole punching through - he heard the crackle of ice, and the chill of frost, as a layer of sleet suddenly began to spread across the entirety of his cast.

Gordon sneered and clenched his teeth, as the excruciating touch of frostbite pecked at his forearm.

"You're about to become a Gordon Freeman Ice-pop, pal." Kim snickered, as he watched the frost consume Gordon's cast, knowing it would soon spread to the man himself. "Just think, you'll be a hit with all the kiddies!"

"Ngh!" Gordon wailed through his teeth, as the icy sting became unbearable. With no other options immediately available, he withdrew - retreating between a row of aquapods. But the blight of benumbing frost was still spreading - it had almost completely consumed his cast, turning it into a giant icicle. And judging from the malevolent officer's ridicule, it would not cease until it mortally congealed his entire body. With no other ideas, he raised his frosted arm up, over his head, and threw himself down to his knees, slamming his forearm down against the hard metal floor.

"AGGGHHHH!" Freeman's harrowing wail filled the room. The once silvery cast splintered off his arm - shattering into a million pieces, as if it were made of fine, brittle glass. With the arctic encumbrance off his arm, the consuming frost ceased to spread - but it still left its icy biting sting upon Gordon's flesh as he trembled from the pain - clenching his fist and clutching his wrist with his opposite hand.

The mending wound he'd received on Xen, at the hands of Alra's Reaper husk, by means of his own crowbar, had been re-exposed. It was a gooey, viscous, crimson daub through the center of his forearm, with dried tracks of blood radiating from the center like the branches from a tree. Just then, still trying to recover from the harrowing ordeal, he heard Kim's jack-booted approach, from the other side of the pod, forcing him to gather himself and scramble away in search of another stratagem.

* * *

><p>As rays of artificial sun washed over the lake sized pool at the epicenter of the Lido deck, the only sound that could be distinguished was the soothing tranquility of foamy waves softly crashing upon a peaceful shore. Clouds of white cotton wafted by on a holographic screen, which surrounded the outer-perimeter of the pool's lounging area, like a dome. Palm trees, coconut trees, and other exotic, alien flora swayed back and forth, on the screen, with the gentle caress of an invisible breeze. But where this ambient illusion would usually correspond with the bustle of children at play, teenagers zooming down the towering, twisting sets of waterslides, or leaping off the diving boards, and adults lounging and laughing by the pool - Now, there was only an eerie stillness. Not a single being in sight to disturb the sublime serenity of this picture perfect paradise. That is until...<p>

"UNNNNNNGGHH!" A man raled in pain, as his body crashed through dome shaped, hologram-emitting wall, like a projectile. Shepard tumbled through a shower of sparks, circuitry, and debris, as the perfect image of a sunny, seaside shore, erupted into a visage of snowy-static, like a television screen with no reception. He hurtled painfully onto the floor, crashing into a set of white recumbent deck-chairs, breaking them apart on impact.

As the crackle of static hissed, from the now broken section of the massive screen, a rotund, armored krogan reared his head and stepped in through the hole. His pale-green brow furrowed with anger, as he

sifted through the broken wood of the deck chairs, tossing their splintered remains aside, and sifting for the man underneath.

When he exposed a bruised, and battered Shepard, laying on his back, with a twin streaks of blood oozing from his mouth and nose, he reached down, took a firm hold of his shirt collar, and yanked him back up to a vertical base. What was sure to be dead weight, suddenly sprang to life, with a vengeance, as John retaliated with fierce intensity.

"Hrah!" "Humph!" "Huah!" He snarled in a rage, as he swung a wide left, followed by a stiff right. Back and forth, one after another, the pop of Shepard's jackhammer blows on Kargas' reptilian flesh resonated throughout the deserted deck. But just as he began to gain momentum, and force the krogan into a backwards reel, his next punch was stopped cold when Kargas intercepted it with his own mammoth hand, like a baseball into a catcher's mitt.

John grit his teeth, as he tried to pull his arm back, but the krogan's grip had already solidified around his right fist. So he launched his left. Again, it was intercepted and lodged into Kargas' girder-like grip.

"You know, I almost regret that you're not at 100% for this!" The krogan remarked, with both Shepard's hands in his crushing clutches. At that moment, he careened John's right hand, back into his own face, with an arduous crack on his teeth.

"Mmmph!" Suddenly released, Shepard instinctively covered his jawline with both hands, as he stumbled backwards, reeling and wobbling, but still on his feet.

"Almost!" Kargas said, cynically, as he moved in again.

Relentless, John erupted once more, meeting the krogan head on. He charged in, with his elbow raised like the cow-catcher on a locomotive, and plowed it straight into the broadside of Kargas' face. In one fluid, follow up motion, he raised his leg, delivering a hard heel kick into the center of Kargas' armored chest, sending the krogan hurtling backwards, and tumbling to the floor, on his seat.

Not waiting a single, solitary moment, John charged forward at the seated mercenary, aiming at his head with his foot, like a placekicker sprinting for a field goal kick. His foot swung out, on course with the the krogan's face, when it too was suddenly arrested by Kargas' powerful, and uncannily swift hands.

"You're slower than I imagined, Shepard!" He growled, as he shoved the Commander back, and shot to his feet. In the second it took John to regain his balance, Kargas was already on top of him, swinging a devastating shot straight up into his midsection.

"UMPH!" John coughed and grunted all at once, as he felt the oxygen explode out of his lungs. He hunched over, staring at the floor in pain, when he felt something pushing down on the back of his head. Kargas wrapped his hands around the back of Shepard's skull, pulling him down, as he launched a high knee up towards his face. Moments before the armored knee could collide into his nose, John crossed his

hands over his face, blocking the shot, much in the same way Kargas had done earlier.

Finding the first attempt fruitless, the mercenary cocked his knee back, and swung in a second time, then a third. Finally, on his fourth attempt - sweet satisfaction, as he felt his destructive knee break through the human's hand, and careen straight into his nose and face. The sheer force of the blow caused John's head to fly up, as he was tossed backwards, like a blood belching ragdoll.

John tumbled to the floor; the lower half of his face dripping with blood, as his nose hemorrhaged. He drew one hand over his mouth - the bitter taste of blood growing more prominent with each passing second, as he rolled over onto his stomach. Somehow again, the way no ordinary mortal man should be able to do, he began to push himself off the floor.

"You are an extraordinary creature, Shepard," Kargas lauded, with a genuine respect for the valiant exhibition reflected in his eyes, as he strolled over. "I do admire your mettle. But I cannot forgive the sins you've inflicted on my people..." He affirmed, as he crouched down besides Shepard. He drew his mammoth, gloved hands over the top of John's head, clutching at his forehead, with his fingers like talons. He pulled back, arching the Commander's head and neck backwards. John panted and gasped heavily, as he weakly flailed his arm in barely conscious attempt to free himself.

"Tonight I feast on your flesh!" Kargas' whisper hissed into Shepard's ear, moments before his mouth opened wide, with an evil, toothy grin that revealed his razor sharp incisors. Suddenly, he opened even wider, and lunged forward - sinking his teeth straight into the flesh of Shepard's sinewy left shoulder.

"AAAARRRGHHH-UGHH!" John screamed with clenched eyes, and gritted teeth at the agonizing jolt from the ravenous bite. His muscles tightened with the pain, and he immediately began to swing right-handed punches into Kargas' lock-jawed face, over his left shoulder, doing so perhaps on instinct alone. As the desperate, yet bone-crunching shots took their toll on Kargas, he ultimately pulled back, pulling his teeth out of John's now bloody shoulder. The Commander's first instinct was to drape his hand over the afflicted area and put as much distance as he could between himself and the voracious krogan. He scrambled to his feet, and scurried a few steps away, in a disoriented stupor.

Just then, the tip of Kargas' tongue tasted the bitter flavor of his own blood, as it streamed out of his nose and washed over his lips. He wiped his snout with his gloved hands, and pulled back a glossy pool of his own blood in his palm. He snickered and sniffled, as he looked up. His human enemy was stumbling about towards the water slides beside the pool, in a drunken fashion, with his head drooping down over his chest and his right hand clutching his left shoulder.

An evil gleam flickered in the vindictive krogan's eyes, and a throaty growl resonated from his chest, as he watched his prey bungle around. He tightened his fists, bared his teeth, and lowered his head - waiting for that moment when Shepard would turn around, like a hungry alligator waits for a gazelle to get close enough to the

water's edge for a drink, before lunging in and dragging it to a watery grave.

John seemed to stumble over his own feet, and lashed out with a wild left swing, as if to hit an opponent that wasn't there. Before long, he wobbled over towards the massive, towering silly straw of a water slide, near the edge of the pool, fighting against his knees insistence to buckle, with each step he took. Finally getting there, he reached up and hooked one hand onto the massive blue tube, using it to steady himself.

As he struggled to keep conscious, and regain his composure, he slowly began to turn back around. Kargas grinned. And as soon as he spotted the whites of Shepard's glazed-over eyes, he took off, blitzing towards the bloodstained Commander at full steam! John saw the krogan coming, and somewhere in his head his brain screamed at his legs to move out of the way, but the signal wasn't making it through. He just stood there, greeting the inevitable assault, as Kargas plowed into gut. The blow swept him off his feet, and rammed him, spine first, into the bottom tier of the complex, multi-leveled waterslide, with a thunderous crash, as both men were swallowed up by the collapsing tower of plastic and PVC.

41. Chapter 41: Battle For The Illustria VI

****Salvation: Episode I - The Taking of the Carmenta Illustria****

Disclaimer: This fan-fiction is part of an episodic series taking place after Salvation: A Half-Life/Mass Effect Universe Fan Fiction, which will lead directly to its sequel, Salvation II: Project Prometheus. These episodes and sequel take place OUTSIDE of the Mass Effect 3 continuity. Characters property of their respective companies, Half-Life created by Valve and Mass Effect created by Bioware.

****Chapter 41: Battle for the Illustria (Part VI)****

****The Fall****

"I see you mother fucker!" POW! POW! Kim snarled in a rage, as he unloaded two shots, which sparked and ricocheted off the rear of one of the aquapods, just as Gordon's visage bolted behind it. The two men weaved their way around the various rows and columns comprised of the abundant pods, in a savage game of cat and mouse. Gordon's purpose was to give himself some distance as he thought of a way to beat this man who, at the moment, seemed indestructible. His earlier experience with a trained turian mercenary told him that getting into a straight out fist-fight with another military trained individual was a bad idea. But without the use of his own armor and normal arsenal, what else was there?

"I never read in the history codices that Gordon Freeman was such a chickenshit!" Kim's voice resonated, with a fury, throughout the loading bay as he ejected a smoking, depleted thermal clip from his extraordinary pistol, and inserted a fresh one in turn.

Kim strolled out into the main central aisle that divided the room in two, and once more began his scrutinizing search. His eyes surveyed

the rows he passed , watching for movement with a quick but thorough glance, while his ears sampled the noise, listening for the same. Just then, both his eyes and ears took note of a discrepancy. One of the aquapods appeared to jitter a bit, and a faint blue glow began to radiate through the front windows, from within. Kim hunkered down low, hoping for the element of surprise should his nemesis be cowering within. He moved up to the aquapod, and practically hugged its rounded edges, as he made his way to the rear side, where the main door was situated. When he reached the back, he wasn't surprised to find that the main entry hatch was ajar about an inch. He crept up to the side of the door, and peered in with his one good eye.

The inside of the aquapod was choked in darkness - a black abyss of shadowy outlines and vaguely identifiable shapes. But one thing was as visible to him as the midday sun hanging in a clear blue sky. There in the darkness was the broad outline of a figure resting calmly within. He could make out the vague silhouette of a body, shoulders, and a head framed by Freeman's unmistakably bright targeting visor. A sinister twinkle shone in Kim's eyes, as he grinned. A pinstripe of blue light from the visor lined his face, perfectly tracing the scar across his eye, as he watched the nuisance sitting there in the dark, perfectly still - most likely fearful of making a sound. With sidearm in hand, Kim moved to open the door. But as he reached for the hatch handle another, more satisfying idea crept into his twisted mind. He remembered spotting something on the wall behind him when he made his approach. And a quick turn to inspect confirmed that he had.

On the gray, nondescript wall directly behind the aquapod, there was a bright red case, a bright red switch, and a bright red cannister. The cannister was nothing more than a fire extinguisher, and the switch was but a trigger for a fire alarm - but the item that had peaked his attention was the red glass case nestled into the wall. Behind a gleaming pane of fragile glass, etched with the words "IN CASE OF FIRE, BREAK GLASS" was a pristine conditioned fire axe. It had a red and silver blade, with a broad razor edge on one side, and a sharpened spike pick on the other. The weighted steel head was mounted onto a yellow graphite handle, whose base was encased in a black rubber grip.

After all the grief that this miserable imitator had caused him - ruining his plans and costing him a king's ransom in wealth - he salivated at how much more satisfying this would be as opposed to a quick, clean gunshot. Kim took a few steps back, away from the hatch, never once taking his eyes off it, as he collapsed his pistol, and sheathed it on his magnetic hip holster.

He quickly raised his right arm and drove a sharp elbow back into the glass pane, causing it to shatter on impact with a loud percussion. In one fluid movement, he scooped the axe up, off of its mounting brackets, and brandished it like a medieval knight. He bounced around on antsy knees, waited for the hatch to fly open to reveal an escaping Freeman. But to his surprise, it never did. Kim's grip around the axe only tightened, as he stepped back up to the door. His one good eye peered through the crack again, and to his surprise the figure in the targeting visor had not moved. He was just sitting there - stiff as a corpse. Kim sneered and yanked back on the hatch. He stepped to one side, allowing the door to swing open in a downward motion, creating a small flight of stairs up into the pod. Gritting his teeth, furrowing his brow, and raising the axe high up over his

head, he charged in!

"AARRRGHH-Huh?!" His impassioned warcry was cut short, as he lunged onto the small flight steps - taken aback by what he saw. The light from the loading bay spilled into the darkened interior of the pod, splashing a white square of visibility onto the figure he'd seen before. It was clear now that the body and shoulders were nothing more than the backing of a chair, whose headrest had been deceptively adorned with Freeman's targeting visor.

"What the fu-UMPH!" A sudden, unexpected force struck Kim's side, like a wrecking ball, as Gordon plowed into him and drove him off the small flight of stairs. Both men tumbled to the floor, into another violent tussle. With surprise on his side, Gordon shot to his knees above the felled Kim, and lunged for the handgun on his hip.

"Oh no you don't!" Kim grunted - holding the collapsed weapon down against his holster, thus preventing Gordon from freeing it. The one-eyed Commander still had the axe firmly in hand. He didn't have enough room for a wide swing with the blade, but that didn't stop him from slamming the long graphite handle into Freeman's naked jaw, again and again, like a bunting bat to a baseball. As the shots took their toll, Gordon cringed in pain, and reeled backwards, with his hands shielding his face.

Finally with a bit of breathing room, Kim sat up and threw the axe over his head, cocking it back like a woodcutter. Gordon looked up just in time to see the razor sharp blade come slicing down, towards his head, intent of splitting him in two. He dove to one side, onto his belly, the split second before steel blade met steel floor. CLANG! Came the sound, as the axe head dug deep into the metallic surface. And in the time it took the maligned officer to oust it back out, the diligent physicist was already back up to his feet. He charged Kim once more, just as Kim swung the axe around his shoulder, like a batter at plate, rather than over his head. Gordon rushed in, and his first natural instinct was to arrest axe before it could get into motion. He intercepted the swing, wrapping both hand around the long, yellow stem.

"Humph!" "Hngh!" Both grunted, as they engaged in literal tug of war, for possession of the axe. But it didn't take long for the trained soldier to regain the upper-hand. He swung the butt end of the handle into Gordon's face again, with a rowing motion, causing the wary physicist to reel, but not fall off. He then twisted the axe around, as if he were turning a helm wheel on a boat, spinning Gordon about, and contorting his arms in the process. With his nemesis clinging on by a thread, all he left to do was to swing a stiff kick into his gut, bending him over, followed immediately by a brutal high knee to the face. A sputter of blood gushed for Gordon's nose and lips as he flew backwards, crashing spine first, onto the floor.

Despite the sudden excruciating throbs pounding in his snout and mandible, Gordon sat back up in a flash.

"Head's up!" He heard the condescending Commander shout out, coaxing him to look up just in time to see the axe blade come swinging towards his neck.

"Hngh!" Gordon grunted, as he laid back down, practically throwing himself to the floor. He felt the breeze, and watched the blade float

over his face, with a swish, as it sliced through the air.

CLANG! PLUNK! The wild blade struck steel once more, but it wasn't the floor this time. No, the axe had dug itself deep into the side of one of the aquapods. More than that, the force behind the rage fueled swing had managed to sever the chain tethering a heavy grapnel anchor to the pod. The anchor plopped onto the floor with a thud, and something about it immediately caught Gordon's eye.

Kim yanked the axe from the aquapod, and cocked his arms over his head once more. As the barbarous swing came slicing down, Gordon lunged for the anchor, and held it up, intercepting the blade before it could rend his face in twain.

"RRRRRGGGGHHH-MMMMPH!" The fog-eyed Commander grunted and heaved, as he pushed against the axe with all his might, while the physicist inversely pushed back. Both their arms trembled, with weapons locked, before Gordon raised his leg and kicked at Kim's armored chest, with the butt of his heel, giving him the breadth to stand up.

He shot to his feet, and brandished the anchor like a sword, while Kim rebalanced himself, and did the same with his axe. Something about this weapon appealed to the war-marred physicist. It was heavy and solid. Sharp, yet blunt. Razor edges at the end of rounded, bent tips. It may not have been his customary crowbar, but it felt right. It would make a suitable stand-in.

"Alright mother fucker, come on!" The fog-eyed Commander snarled, incensed, as he blitzed towards Gordon with a swing. CLANG! Came the sound again, as axe blade struck anchor head - both glancing off each other without give. "I'm gonna kill you!" He bayed again, as he began a fervent storm of rampant swings "I'm gonna gouge out your eyes! Tear out your heart! And cut off your fucking head! YARRRGHH!" He bellowed, as his axe blade buried itself into one of the aquapod windshields, the split second after Gordon dove out of the way. As he struggled to free it, Gordon dashed in, with the anchor cocked back. Kim yanked the axe out, and barred it horizontally across his person to block Gordon's shot. The anchor's claws hooked around the axe handle, as both men pulled back, finding their weapons interlocked. They vied back and forth, grunting and heaving, as they spun around in violent circles.

With this stalemate going nowhere, Kim changed stratagem. He raised one foot, and slammed his heel down hard, with the force of a jackhammer, onto the tip of Gordon's scuffed up dress shoes.

"AGH!" Gordon winced in pain, as he instinctively hopped up on one foot, costing him his valuable leverage. The irate Commander drove Gordon back, pinning his shoulders against the nearest pod, as he hooked his hand around the back of Gordon's head, and pulled his face down towards the jagged spikes of his own anchor. Gordon trembled to keep his head up, as the blurry, razor sharp tip jutted ever closer to his unprotected eye.

"Don't worryâ€¦!" Kim mocked in a coarse, and labored voice, as he continued to heave Gordon down to impalement. "Losing an eye ain't so bad! Take it from a guy who knows!"

As hard as Gordon struggled, he was outmatched. His hands were useless to him - if he stopped pushing away at the anchor, even for a

moment, it would surely pierce his eye, without question. And these metal prongs were long enough that they'd likely drive all the way into his frontal lobe. With his back against the wall, and no way to escape, he could actually feel his blinking eyelashes brush against the jagged tip of the anchor. Just then, he remembered something. He remember what he'd seen his friend John Shepard do to a lewd and lascivious turian peon without the use of his hands. As the razor tip of the anchor kissed the fluid over Gordon's pupil, he wrapped his leg around Kim's, and pushed down against the back of his knee, with his foot.

The sinister Commander genuflected onto one knee, losing all his drive, and giving Gordon the license to get free. He retook control of the anchor, which was still hooked around the axe handle, and actually used it to disarm Kim by prying the weapon out of his grip, with a powerful jerk. He yanked back hard, like a fisherman reeling in the catch of the day, and the axe went flying up over the aquapod. Gordon shoved his bewildered attacker back. Once more defenseless, Kim's first response was to go back for the gun on his hip, but before he could even muster the motion, Gordon charged in, full steam with a wide, unmitigated swing.

He let forth a throaty roar, as he plunged his anchor straight into Kim's chest, aiming for his heartless void. Clank! Came the sound, as he struck his target, spot on. One of the four jagged prongs buried itself deep into the reinforced armor chest plate - penetrating the holographic outer-layer with ease, since it was not moving fast enough to be considered a ballistic projectile.

The impact should've sent Kim flying off his feet, but Gordon held fast to the anchor. The unrestrained inertia did, however, propel them both a good distance forward, as they stumbled back out into the loading bay's central aisle, nearly tumbling over each other with every step. The maligned Commander felt the icy kiss of steel to his flesh, as the spike succeeded in penetrating the armor fully, but it only just managed to incise the surface of his skin.

Having done no significant damage, Gordon tried to pry the anchor out, but it was quite effective at doing what it was designed to do. It remained firmly anchored in place. With the two men staring eachother down, Kim sneered and clenched his fists, in a rage. At that moment, as a wicked gleam shone in the Commander's eyes, Gordon heard the distinctive sound of electricity buzzing. Kim raised his right fist, just then. It trembled in anger and was consumed by the orange glow of an omni-tool, and the cerulean blaze of an omni-taser at the end of his knuckles. His opposite hand grabbed Gordon by the throat, and he launched a brutal, electrified jab straight for his face!

Knowing the painful sting of electricity only too well, from a multitude of vortal strikes, and a myriad of Combine stun-baton blows, Gordon reached up and hooked the live-wire fist just before it could make contact with his face. The static actually lifted the whiskers on his chin, like steel shavings to a magnet, as Kim continued fighting for a single, jolting touch. And in swift, abrupt motion Gordon attempted to deter electrocution by torquing Kim's wrist, and flinging it downward. He didn't count on it making contact with the anchor-head still buried in Kim's chest...

KZzZzZzZT! Both men squirmed, writhed, spasmed and convulsed as the

powerful jolt from Kim's illegally suped-up omni-taser coursed through the anchor, which was still in physical contact with both men. Each second was like a billion hot needles being shoved into each of their individual muscle. Their teeth rattled, their eyes flew open with pain and alarm, and the veins in their arms and necks seemed to bulge to the point of bursting, until finally KZzZzZzZat! A sudden surge and an eruption of sparks blew both men apartâ€|

* * *

><p>A squeaky wheel chirped, as a refreshment cart, draped in a white cloth, was pushed down the long corridor running along the outside of the Promenade Deck's now demolished casino, by a stubby volus barely tall enough to see over it. He rushed down the cherrywood path, breezing past deck chairs, lounging couches, and a multitude of lavish arrangements of bushes and flora, with his prized cart at the fore.<p>

Just then, the rhythmic pounding of heavy laden boots caused him drastic distress. He quickly swiveled his head around, looking for a place of refuge, as the thunderous stomping drew closer. He spotted a nearby picnic table, like many scattered across the promenade, and dove underneath it, leaving the cart nearby.

A troop of armed Alliance soldiers, donned in heavy, dark grey, tactical armor, bolted by, in formation. There was nothing suspicious about an innocent looking refreshment cart on a cruise ship, and the picnic table certainly wasn't out of place, so the strike team simply whizzed by, without a second glance, en route to securing the rest of the ship.

After a few second, Tarrik ever so warily peeked his head out. The soldiers had gone, and it was best not to doddle. He scrambled out from under the table, and took his place at the rear of the heavy cart, as he started pushing it again, with a more pressing fervor this time. After what seemed like an eternity, he reached the small enclosure housing the elevators. To his surprise, the door to one of them had been pried open, leaving it a black, shadow filled void that led to a deadly drop of at least fifty feet. Paying this no mind, Tarrik rushed towards the button, and pressed the one marked with a down arrow.

OFFLINE - a sign flashed in bright red, holographic letters, taunting him with its brazenness.

"Argh!" He sighed and groaned all at once, as he pressed it again.

OFFLINE. OFFLINE. OFFLINE. It flashed on and off, quicker and quicker, as he started to pound on the button with incessant urgency.

"Damnation!" He griped to himself, as he realized this would quickly get him nowhere. Unwilling to give up, he crept up to the very edge of the gaping hole left by the pursuing Freeman minutes ago.

Tarrik gulped as he looked down at the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel. A white, enchanting light shined out of an opened access hatch from within the idle elevator car sitting at the bottom of the shaft. Stepping in a little further, clutching the doorway for dear

life all the while, he noticed a maintenance ladder directly to his right, welded onto the interior of the shaft. He quickly turned and pulled the cumbersome refreshment cart over to him, just shy of the edge. He yanked the white cloth off of it, revealing all eight of the black duffel bags, brimming with a king's ransom of ill-gotten gains. He pulled one of the heavy bags off, and slid it over to the edge, before pushing it in. Immediately he stepped out to watch it plummet down, down, into the shadows, before THUMP! It plopped onto the roof of the elevator car. Again and again he grabbed each bag and sent it hurtling down into the massive chute. They bombarded the roof of the elevator car, and two of them actually managed to land within the opened access hatch - but a few had split open from the impact, erupting in a glittery mess of gold and valuables.

"Mrgh!" He muttered, annoyed. But now was no time to be cautious. With the last bag delivered into the hole, he inched his way inward, traversing the narrow ledge as he reached for the ladder.

"Whewâ€|" He exhaled a considerable sigh upon reaching it, as he clutched its rungs with his pincer-like hands and began a slow, awkward descent, after his fortune.

* * *

><p>Shepard could no longer cohere his own senses as he teetered on the brink of unconsciousness. His entire body was one big bruise, and his head thundered like a kettle drum. He felt a weighty burden bear down on his chest, and the cold chill of running water on his face. It blinded him - obscuring his vision like a steady jet from a water hose. He spewed water from his mouth and nose with every breath he gave, just to keep it from rushing into his lungs. He tried to move his arms and legs but he couldn't. Was he dead? Dying? Suddenly, he felt the weight lift off his chest, allowing him to breathe a bit more deeply, as Kargas pulled a large section of the demolished polyvinyl water slide off of him.<p>

John coughed and sputtered a bit, shielding his eyes from the endless deluge of water trickling down from the broken segment of tubing above, once he was able to move his hands again. As his eyes focused once more, he watched the mighty krogan approach and crouch down by his side.

"Do you have children, Shepardâ€|?" He asked in a surprisingly civil tone. "Have you ever had a son? Did you ever... hold him in your arms, waiting for him to moveâ€|? Or to cryâ€|?" He asked, holding his arms out as if he were cradling an infant. "I had a son onceâ€|" He declared, with a reminiscent smile, as he glanced up at the ceiling, in a daydream. "Or I would've hadâ€| I held him in my armsâ€| Held him for so long, waiting for some sign of lifeâ€| But it never cameâ€|"

He was silent for a moment. Contemplative. John could barely hold his head up as he looked at him. His vision, though still blurry, could make out fluid pooling in the krogan's eyes, as he tried to swallow back at something in his throat. John winced a little, as he thought about trying to stand. But he didn't even have the strength left to speak. He could smell the scent of blood in his nostrils, and taste its bitter flavor on his tongue.

"You know, he was born with a green crest on his head." Kargas began

again, as he turned back to Shepard, smiled, and tapped the tip of his forehead. This was krogan no longer speaking with the disposition of a remorseless killer, but rather a proud father. "It would've grown into a green brow plate just like mineâ€¦ Do you know how rare that is?!" He exclaimed with an amalgam of anguish and pride, as his voice cracked with sorrow.

"My own mateâ€¦ My strong, beautiful, Lukalaâ€¦ She sacrificed herself to the salarian's experimentsâ€¦"

At that instant, Mordin's chilling words came surging back to Shepard's memory. "_Dead krogan. Female. Tumors indicate experimentation. No restraint marks. Volunteer... Weyrloc Female willing to risk procedures. Hoped for cure. Pointless... Pointless waste of lifeâ€¦"_ Whoever this Lukala was may or may not have been the gentle dead krogan they'd found on Tuchanka - but her fate was the same.

"She sacrificed herself so that our people could have a futureâ€¦" Kargas' continuing words snapped John back to the moment, as he locked eyes with the krogan again. Eyes that suddenly grew angry and animalistic. "A future that you destroyed!" He snarled, as he lunged forward, and hooked Shepard's throat.

"Ack-ugh!" John coughed and gagged, as he suddenly felt himself get hoisted up, off the ground, and get carted away, with his feet dangling in the air.

"And so now I destroy you!" The krogan bellowed, as he flung the Commander into the shallow end of the lake sized pool.

John coughed a sputtered - his head breached the surface, as he splashed about, treading water with his hands, in a disoriented state, whilst Kargas jumped in after him. The krogan hooked his massive hands around Shepard's shoulders, like reinforced steel clamps, and pushed him down beneath the water. "Now I take the life of the butcher of the krogan race!" He hollered in a blood-rage, as bubbles and garbled shrieks bubbled from under the water!

* * *

><p>A loud, intermittent thumping, jangling sound pounded in Kim's ear from a short distance away. It was like the sound of a large, heavy sack of loose change being dropped on a metal surface. His brow twitched, and his eyes began to hatch from their eyelid eggshells, as the pounding restored his consciousness. He groaned, as he tried to sit up - his every muscle aching, jolting, and contracting from the immense shock he'd sustained. It was like his whole body had been asleep, and was suddenly overcome by the pricking needle sensation it gets when it tries to wake back up. He felt a sharp sting - like something burning a hole through his chest. As his vision came back into focus, he looked down at a charred hole in the center of his once pristine armor, where the anchor had pierced it. The hole itself was smoking and smouldering. Sparks gushed out, like lava from a volcano, and he felt it burning his chest like a hot brand.<p>

"Agh-Ugh!" He grunted, scrambling to remove the inoperative armor, before it could set his shirt on fire. It was no longer any use to him anyway. His tech shields were gone - their generator module

likely fried in the powersurge. He drew the short circuiting armor up over his head, and tossed aside. At that instant, he spotted his enemy right in front of him, a few feet away, using one of the yellow aquapod control panels to slowly drag himself up to his feet.

Still seated on the floor, Kim reached for the gun on his hip, secretly praying he hadn't lost it. To his delight, he hadn't.

"Hold it there, you piece of shit!" Kim hissed through his teeth, incensed, as he drew his powerful weapon on Gordon.

The cyclopean Commander didn't even rush to get back to his feet, as he sat in the middle of the central aisle, directly behind the pod. He had this bothersome imposter dead to rights and they both knew it, as a pale, wounded, and wary Gordon turned to face him.

"You are the most contemptible mother fucker I've ever met, you know that?!" Kim berated, with an exasperated shake of his head, never once taking his gun off of Gordon. "I never thought I could hate someone, within half an hour of meeting them, as much as I hate you!"

Gordon steadied himself, standing proud and firm, without an ounce of give in his stoic, resolute expression, as he stared down the barrel of Kim's extraordinary weapon. Just then, as he glanced over at the control panel he'd used to pull himself back to his feet. A thought crept into his mind, and his eyes began to flicker

"You're gonna die, freak!" Kim insolently asserted, as if hoping to wring some fearful pleas of mercy from Gordon. "Come on! No last words?!"

Gordon's eyes focused. His upper lip seemed to twitch a bit, like a dog preparing to bare its teeth. But his only response to the threats of execution was his historically trademarked silence.

"..."

"Fine" Kim capitulated, with an aggravated shrug, as he sat on the floor. "Well say hello to the REAL Gordon Freeman for me 'cause I'm gonna send you to meet him! Sayonara, freak!"

In the fleeting moment that Kim's finger began to constrict around the trigger, Gordon flung his hand out, pushing against the large lever release on the aquapod's control panel. A loud, metal screeching rumbled throughout the deck, and Kim's eyes flew open with alarm, as the mammoth pod slid down the rail of trailer, like a train on a track, barreling straight towards him.

It all happened so fast. Gordon turned and bolted away to seek refuge behind the pod, as Kim grit and bared his teeth with a seething ire. In his rage he unleashed a torrent of gunshots, choosing to take the object of his contempt with him, if nothing else.

"Ugh!" Gordon grit his teeth, as one of the rounds bore itself deep into the side of his gut; announced by a gushing fountain of crimson fluid.

As Gordon disappeared out of sight, the massive pod careened off the

tracks and CRASHED down hard to the floor.

"AAAAGGGHHHHH!" Commander Andrew Kim's harrowing wail of agony and torment resonated throughout the entire loading bay, and perhaps the entire ship, as the pod slammed down onto his legs, crushing them like twigs under foot, when it came to a rest.

"AAAARRRGHHH! OH MY GOD! AAAAAAAHHH!" He howled and bayed in anguish, clenching his eyes, and clutching his head with both hands, as he wriggled and writhed on the floor, completely pinned down and impotent. He sat up, he laid down, he covered his eyes, bit on his knuckles, and pounded his fists on the floor - doing anything he could do to find some shred of alleviation. "ARRGH! MY LEGS! MY LEGS! UGGHH! YOU MOTHER FUCKER! ARGH! I'LL KILL YOU!"

* * *

><p>John gasped profusely - his lungs sucking in the air they languished for, as his nose and mouth only just breached the surface of the water, before he was forced back down.<p>

The water swallowed up his muffled cries, now just a garbled eruption of bubbles and moans. His hands reached up from under the surface, like a hand reaching out of the grave, as he tried fruitlessly to pry the krogan's tree-limb like arms off his collarbone. Kargas looked down at the splashing figure beneath the waves with a grimace. He could feel Shepard's life slipping away by his own hand. His breathing quickened - his blood and adrenaline surging as he squeezed tighter and pushed down further. "Dieâ€|" He whispered, as he felt the human's movement's begin to weaken and slow. "DIE!"

John's hands sank back down beneath the water, as he lost his grip on the krogan's arms. His body quivered and quaked, as the spewing bubbles gurgling away his precious air lessened from a frantic eruption to a few little blips. With one final moment of tension, his body went limpâ€|" "Blub-blub-blub... blipâ€|!"

Kargas sneered as he held the human under a little longer, shaking him with anger and loathing. When the lifeless body yielded no further response, he panted and sighed with elation, as he pulled him up by his shirt collar.

"Hehâ€|!" The krogan chuckled in disbelief over his own accomplishment, as he pulled the limp human out. John's bloody face had been wiped clean, but the remnants of battle - the cuts, the bruises, and the abrasions yet remained. His heavy head fell flaccidly to the back, with his mouth hanging open. His face glistened with water, as two streams flooded out from his nostrils. He was quiet now. Peaceful. Stillâ€|

"I'veâ€| I've done it!" Kargas jubilantly exclaimed, as he held Shepard's lifeless carcass up, like a trophy. "I have done what the Reapers never could! I've taken the life of the butcher of the krogan race! I KILLED JOHN SHEPARD!"

"Not yet you haven'tâ€|!" A wrathful voice declared, stunning and startling the krogan, as the human Commander sprang back to life in his hands. Kargas' eyes flew open with alarm, as John glared into them with rancorous intent. Before he could even fathom what was happening, the Commander wrapped both his hands around the krogan's

right arm, wrenching it around as he swung his legs up, out of the water, only to wrap them around the arm as well. Utilizing every ounce of his weight and strength, John torqued the mercenary's arm back and kicked in his face, thus knocking him down, and forcing him under the water instead, with his arm wrenched tightly in Shepard's clutches.

"BLUBB! BLURRBLE! BLRRB!" Kargas wailed in shock and in pain, as John pulled back on the tree-limb like arm with every fiber of his being, and with every intention of yanking the arm straight out of the socket.

"Come on, come on, pop! Pop!" He whispered in a creaky voice, as the krogan splashed and gurgled away his air, beneath the turbulent waters. Just thenâ€¦ the sound his was waiting for. PLOCK! Kargas' arm went limp and suddenly got longer. Bubbles spewed, like the eruption of vesuvius, from the tormented krogan, as he let forth a muffled, blood-curdling, scream of agony. "BLURRRRBB! GGGLLLLLRRRRBBB!"

Shepard released his hold on the arm and swiftly paddled away, allowing the krogan space to breach. "ARRRGGHHH!" He screamed in torment, when his head burst out from under the waves. "Uggghhhh!" He groaned, clutching his excruciating right shoulder with his left hand, only now realizing that he'd lost all use of it - all mobility. In a mad, pain driven scramble, he clambered out of the pool, and fell over onto all fours, gasping and panting heavily.

He turned to look back into the swimming hole, with pain coursing through his shoulder, and he spotted the seemingly indestructible human slowly swimming towards him. Shepard's face was half submerged, up to his eyes - and he treaded the water slowly, like an alligator moving in for the kill. Kargas shook his head in shock and awe, as he stood up and bolted away, only to stumble over a nearby deck chair. He rolled onto his back, still clutching his excruciating shoulder, and watched Shepard rise out of the water, like some other worldly spectre. A demon. It frightened him. Terrified him!

With fear engraved in his eyes, he reached out, took hold of one of the deck chairs, and launched it at Shepard's face. But the encroaching Commander simply seemed to swat the furniture away.

"Noâ€¦! Stay away! Stay away from me!" He pleaded, as he staggered to back to his feet and bolted away. The Commander quickly gave pursuit. He chased him back down the hall, leading towards the elevator they'd both emerged from. John leapt into a forward tackle, crashing against the krogan, and plowing him, shoulder first, against the wall.

"AAGGH!" Kargas cried out in anguish, as the dislocated joint drilled against the wall. He spun himself around, and pushed away at the human.

Refusing to let his irrational fear get the better of him, he bared his teeth and reached around his back with his one working arm, only to pull out a small, but sharp, tactical combat knife.

John quickly put his hands up, and bolstered his stance. He recognized the peril, but he wasn't about to let up now. Kargas

flinched forward, waving and brandishing the knife, with short stabbing motions to intimidate the stalwart Commander, as they circled around each other like duelling varren in a pit. He lunged forward with a swing, aiming to slice across Shepard's belly. A slow, clumsy attack that the Commander anticipated with ease. He sidestepped the swing, hooking his left arm around the krogan's, and locking it in place as he slammed the knife out of Kargas' grip with his right arm, disarming him.

With his the mercenary's arm still locked, John spun him around - slamming him to the ground, face first, and pinning him down. With Kargas thrashing about on the floor, John dropped down and wrapped his legs around the krogan's right one, arresting it in place, as he took hold of Kargas' frying-pan sized foot and began to twist.

"HNNNNNGGGHHH!" The Blood Pack Leader's chest and throat rattled with agony, as he clenched his eyes and ground his teeth together. He pounded his one good fist on the floor, actually managing to crack and chip it from the impact, when suddenlyâ€|
PLOCK!

"ARRRRRRRRRGGGGHHHHH!" Again, the pop was herald to the krogan's dire, horrific wails of agony and torture, as the ligaments in his ankle were snapped in twain.

* * *

><p>"Oh godâ€|!" Kim moaned in anguish. His chest expanded and contracted rapidly, with his heavy respirations, as he laid his palms flat over his eyes. The pain hadn't really abated, but he was growing numb to it now. He withdrew his hands from his face, and partially sat up to look at the pod sitting on what was left of the lower half of his legs. Tortured, dejected, and despairing, he laid his head back and threw his arms out, spread eagle, when he felt the tip of his left index finger brush against something. He turned his head, and spotted his faithful handgun laying by his side, just out of arm's reach.<p>

"Ngh!" Kim stretched and strained, nearly reaching it, as his fingers brushed upon the hilt, when a hard-soled shoe suddenly crunched down on his knuckles.

"ARGH!" He grit his teeth in pain, as he looked up to see an indignant Gordon, standing on his hand, clutching at an oozing wound in his side, with blood spilling out from between his fingers.

With a silent rage burning in his eyes, Freeman bent down, and picked up the coveted weapon. Kim panted and hissed, as he grabbed Gordon's ankle with his free hand, only to have it kicked away, and crushed under foot as well. Freeman stood over Kim, who was now laid out, spread eagle, with both hands immobilized under the physicists soles. With his legs crushed, and his hands pinned down, as if they were nailed to a cross, he was completely at this man's mercy.

The one-eyed Commander hissed as he breathed, gulping before he began. "You're not gonna kill me!" He declared, with assurance, through his teeth "You wouldn't kill someone like this! Leg's crushedâ€| completely helplessâ€|!"

"Oh, wouldn't I?" Came Gordon's surprisingly calm and deadpan response, as he aimed the pistol sights straight down at the spot between the Commander's eyes. "See, I think I understand nowâ€¦ It's taken me some time to see it, but I think I finally get itâ€¦" He explained, with a cold, empty gaze, as the oozing blood from his wound dripped onto Kim's chest. "It's one thing to kill Combine, and Reapers, and monstersâ€¦ But killing other people, that'sâ€¦ That's always been a gray area for me. But like I said, I get it now!" He professed, exhibiting a mildly maniacal grin, as he nodded his head in accord. "Sometimes they're not people anymoreâ€¦ Sometimes they're animalsâ€¦ And sometimesâ€¦ Someone just needs to put the animals down!" He snarled with a wrathful, wrinkled nose sneer, as he bent over and pressed the barrel of the gun to the center of Kim's forehead, forcing it down to the floor.

"So you're just gonna kill meâ€¦?! Just like that?!"

"Yesâ€¦" Gordon nodded, nonchalantly. "And I know you don't believe I'm the real Gordon Freeman. That's okayâ€¦" He said, as he slowly slid the barrel down the bridge of Kim's nose. "Maybe I can convince you that I AM a Doctorâ€¦ Hereâ€¦ Say 'Ahhh'" He instructed with a sinister sarcasm, as he used the barrel to pry Kim's jaw open, before shoving it into his mouth.

"MMMMM... MMMMPH!" Kim muttered, with his lips wrapped around his own gun, as his eyes split open with dread. His shoulders shifted and wrenched from left to right, as he struggled violently, desperately to pull his arms free, but it was no use. His teeth rattled against the barrel, as he began to quiver with fear. "MMMMMPH!"

"Nowâ€¦ You might feel a slight pinchâ€¦" Gordon whispered, as his finger tightened around the trigger.

"Don't do it, Dr. Freeman!" A woman's familiar voice echoed through the loading bay - stopping Gordon for the moment, as he glanced up to see Cameron guardedly approaching from his left.

Gordon gulped. The demented look that had consumed his expression quickly faded to one of distress and uncertainty. "Why shouldn't I do it?!" He beckoned in a shaky voice, as he looked back down at the quivering mass of human garbage at his feet. "He didn't hesitate to kill the Captain, in cold bloodâ€¦! You think he'd hesitate to kill you or me?!" He queried with a rueful timbre in his voice, as he looked back up at her. "You think he cares about the hundreds of lives he was ready to destroy?!"

"No, like I said, I get it nowâ€¦" He professed - the cold, empty resolve returning to his countenance, as he looked back down into the eyes of a trembling killer. "Animals like him don't deserve second chancesâ€¦"

"Please, don't do itâ€¦" Cameron softly pleaded, as she walked up beside Gordon, and gently laid a hand on his trembling shoulder. "Don't do it becauseâ€¦ Because the REAL Gordon Freeman wouldn'tâ€¦ And that's you."

Gordon stoppedâ€¦ His eyes flickered back and forth for a moment, as he saw the blood on his hands and the gun in his grip.

"Oh my godâ€¦!" He uttered, with a gasp, as he quickly pulled the gun

out of Kim's mouth and aimed it away. "What am I doing?!" He asked, shaking and clutching his own head after scaring himself. "I have enough on my conscience without YOUR blood on my hands!" He chided Kim, stuffing the handgun into his pocket, as the sprawled-out officer breathed a visible sigh of relief.

Just then, the glint of something shiny beamed in his eye. His visor was gone, but he could still distinguish shapes and blurs - and he knew immediately that the glint was coming from the golden badge still pinned on Commander Andrew Kim's chest.

"And YOU don't deserve to wear this!" Gordon chided, as he bent down and ripped the badge off of Kim's chest, tearing a piece of navy blue cloth along with it. "My best friend was a security guard-" He announced, as he shook the tainted badge in Kim's face. "-and you spit on his memory by wearing this!" He snarled, as he threw the meaningfully symbol onto the floor, causing it to bend and bounce away, with a ping.

"Pfftâ€|" Kim snickered - even in spite of the grueling pain, he was not above condescension. "Yeah right, let me guessâ€|" 'Bernard Calhoun', right?" He said, with a cynical laugh.

"Hmph." Gordon huffed. He turned as if he was finally going to step off, and liberate Kim's numbing, pinned down hands, when something quickly drew him back.

"Oh, and one other thing!" He declared, as he began to pat down the sides of Kim's thighs, when he suddenly felt a solid little protrusion.

"Hey! Now what the hell are you doing?!" Kim barked, as Gordon rifled through his pocket, fishing out a large, pristine engagement ring.

"THIS doesn't belong to you!" He asserted, as he shook the ring in Kim's face, before stuffing it into his own pocket, and finally stepping off.

"Ohâ€|" Oh my god, you're bleeding!" Cameron frantically exclaimed, noticing Gordon's wound for the first time. "You've been shot!"

"It's alright, it's not badâ€|" Gordon assured, in a soft creaky voice, still holding on tight to the afflicted area. "Didn't hit anything vital, I'll be fine.

As the pair walked away, leaving Kim behind a fractured man, with crushed extremities, he writhed around on his back, seeking some form of comfort as he awaited his inevitable apprehension. As he squirmed around though, he felt something hard jabbing into his spine. He must've landed on something, he initially thought. But at that moment, as he watched Gordon and Cameron slowly walking away, down the aisle, towards the elevator, he grinned. He grinned because remembered the standard issue security handgun he'd commandeered from Cameron, and he quickly realized exactly what was prodding at his back...

* * *

><p>Kargas' armor scraped against the vinyl floor, as he crawled away. His fingers clawed at the grooves between the tiles with only one good arm, and one good leg, as Commander Shepard casually followed behind. The krogan stopped and raised his head. A few feet in the distance, he could see the shadowy recess of the opened elevator door they'd emerged from, as well as the fully assembled shotgun Shepard had previously discarded on the floor - no doubt loaded, and ready to fire. He crawled forward, dragging his limp left arm and right leg along with him.<p>

The krogan's goal was evident, almost immediately to Shepard, as he nonchalantly strolled past the krogan, walked up to the loaded shotgun, and casually picked it up. This didn't really seem to faze the once mighty Blood Pack Mercenary however, as he simply seemed to continue on his path, heading towards the opened elevator chasm.

Chk-Chk! Shepard cocked the weapon, refusing to take any chances, as he primed it and aimed it down at the last Weyrloc. Kargas stopped, just shy of reaching the edge of the elevator, as he turned to face Shepard, and the barrel of the gun he was aiming.

"Go on then, Shepardâ€|" The krogan entreated, in a hoarse and labored voice, as he laid on his side, with a pained and defeated look on his face. "Finish itâ€| Send me to meet my ancestors, in the shining valley!"

"Why?" John bluntly put forth, with a shrug and a shake of his head. "I don't wanna kill you... I've seen enough bloodshed to last me two asari lifetimesâ€| Or krogan lifetimes for that matterâ€| And I truly am sorry about your family."

"Shut up! Don't you dare speak of them!"

John sighed, and shook his head with remorse. "Look. The genophage is a damnable transgression against a wonderful race that should've never been allowed to happen!" He passionately put forth. "But this was not the way to go about funding a cure! Much of the galaxy sees the krogan people as nothing but killers and savages! All you'd accomplish is help them preserve that outlook!"

"Enoughâ€|!" Kargas rejected, with a dismissive wave of his good hand. "Empty words from human filthâ€| Just tell meâ€| Are you going to kill me, or not?"

"I told you, no." The Commander reiterated, as he guardedly lowered the pointed shotgun. "I don't want to kill you... I've no reason to kill you...!"

"So you beat meâ€| Leave me mangledâ€| And then disgrace me by denying me an honorable krogan's death!?"

"I'm sorry you feel it's a disgrace, but yeahâ€|" Shepard maintained, with a shrug and a nod. "You're gonna live to see the genophage curedâ€| Even if you gotta do it from inside a jail cellâ€|"

Kargas bowed and shook his head, with a sigh. "Then there's only one way I can retain my honor in the eyes of the ancestral warlordsâ€|" He reached behind his back, pulled something off his belt, and held up a discus shaped Mark-14 grenade.

John jumped to attention, re-brandishing the shotgun, as he cautiously took a few steps back. "Wait a minute!" He bargained, holding a halting hand up. "Just think for a second. Don't do this!"

The last living member of Clan Weyrloc smiled. He clutched the explosive tightly, and activated a large button on the the center, with his thumb, just as he allowed himself to fall backwards; down into the deep, dark, shadowy chasm of the elevator shaft. Shepard rushed to the edge, peering down, as Kargas' massive silhouette was swallowed up by the darkness.

Tarrik scrounged on the floor of the elevator car, shoveling handfuls of gold, jewelry, and valuables, back into the black duffle bags they'd spilled out of, when suddenly! POW! A massive object came crashing through the ceiling, with a thunderous percussion, like a meteor blazing through the atmosphere to impact onto the earth.

Gordon and Cameron stopped dead in their tracks, a few yards away from the elevator, as the thunderous impact from within the shaft rattled the very floor under their feet.

"What was that?!" Cameron beckoned, brimming with dread at what other horror might await them, as she inadvertently latched herself to Gordon's shoulder, squeezing his arm tight, and feeling safe beside it.

"I have no idea!"

Unbeknownst to either of them, the duplicitous head of Security, Commander Kim, had fished the handgun out from behind his back, and was aiming it square at the base of Gordon's skull!

"Maybe you really are the REAL Gordon Freeman!" Kim muttered to himself, with disdain, as he flicked the safety off and lined up his sights. "But history says Gordon Freeman is dead! And I'm gonna make sure you stay that way!"

Tarrik panted and heaved in a fright, as he stood with his back pressed tightly against the inside of the elevator car. Most of the ceiling had been completely caved in, and the one fluorescent light that had survived, flickered and flashed, with an electrical buzz. As the dust and smoke began to settle, he looked down, shocked to behold the laid out body of his former krogan compatriot.

"...Kargas?!" Tarrik uttered, stunned and amazed. Just then, a sign of life. The mangled mercenary's voice creaked, as he opened his eyes, and glanced over at the impudent volus. Seeing him there put a twinkle in his bloodshot eyes, and an odious grin on his bleeding face.

"Heh!" One final gratifying laugh, and one last breath escaped his lungs. His dimmed eyes rolled back into his head, and his lifeless fist unfurled to reveal a ticking countdown timer on a grenade.

"0:03"

Beneath the mask, Tarrik's eyes watered.

"0:02"

"You big. Stupid. Lizard!" "0:01" BOOOOM!

A deafening explosion thundered out, blowing the elevator doors completely off.

"Look out!" Gordon shouted, instinctively shoving Cameron out of the way and to the ground, as one of the doors sliced across the floor, tumbling on its edge, end over end, with immense velocity, like a spinning, runaway buzz saw blade. It blazed across the room, straight down the center aisle, where Kim was laid out, gun in hand, moments before he could pull the trigger.

"Aww, no!" He managed to utter, just as the door zipped across the floor, straight towards his neck. And across it! Hckgh!

John stood at the edge of the elevator, watching a blinding flash turn into an intense, orange fireball that lit up the darkened shaft, and swiftly began to climb up, at an alarming rate. It would seem that the volus' ammonia-pressurized suit actually worked in amplifying the explosion. John's eyes wide open, as the blaze enveloped the entire shaft.

"Oh! Shit!" He shouted, as he spun around and dove down to the ground, with his hands behind his head, just as the ensuing explosion burst through the doorway, singing the ceiling and everything else it touched.

Burning embers and flakes of debris wafted down around Gordon and Cameron, like a light winter snow, as the two looked up from their place on the ground. The elevator they had planned to take back up was now a flaming, smouldering pit, filled with blackened, broken valuables and debris, which had been fused and soldered together into one large, charred mess.

"W-Wh-! Wh-what was that?!" Cameron stuttered to get the question out, as she trembled on the floor, traumatized.

"I'd say Shepard's doing, if I had to venture a guess!" Gordon conjectured, with a furrowed brow, judging by the charred set of armor and remains left behind, clearly belonging to a krogan.

"Are you alright?" He asked, as he rose back to his feet, gingerly pulling Cameron up with him.

"Yes!" She acknowledged, trying to force a grin onto her shaken countenance. "I am now." She assured, as she took a quick glance back towards Kim. She gasped!

"Oh!" She cried out at the gruesome sight, as she immediately turned back, shielding her eyes, and burying her head into Freeman chest.

"Oh dear!" Gordon uttered upon catching a glimpse of the same sight.

Against her better judgement, she forced herself to pry her face up,

and look over again. An outstretched hand, with a pistol still clutched in its grip, extended from a beheaded body. The remains laid in a vast pool of blood, with the liberated head resting just a few short feet away. Cameron cringed and shuddered, as her teeth rattled.

"He had another gun!" She said, as she trembled. "He! He was going to shoot you in the back!"

Gordon bit down on his clenched lips and shook his head, as he looked on with a pitied look in his eyes. "I guess that's karma for you!"

42. Chapter 42: Homecoming Part I

****Salvation: Episode I - The Taking of the Carmenta
Illustria****

Disclaimer: This fan-fiction is part of an episodic series taking place after Salvation: A Half-Life/Mass Effect Universe Fan Fiction, which will lead directly to its sequel, Salvation II: Project Prometheus. These episodes and sequel take place OUTSIDE of the Mass Effect 3 continuity. Characters property of their respective companies, Half-Life created by Valve and Mass Effect created by Bioware.

****Chapter 42: Homecoming Part I****

****Reunion****

Another shudder shook Cameron's entire body, as she wrapped her arms around herself, like someone huddling for warmth.

"It's alright, let's get out of here!" He suggested, motioning forward with his head. "We'll take the stairs."

Cameron nodded. Just then, without thought, reason, or warning she lunged forward, and gratefully threw her arms around Gordon.

The squeeze caused him to wince a little from the aches and pains riddling his body, and he outstretched his arms in surprise. "Uh!" He uttered, awkwardly fidgeting back and forth. He wasn't sure of what to do with his hands, and he was noticeably reluctant to return the embrace. "Uhm! There, there!" He impassively consoled, very lightly tapping one hand on her back. "It's alright, it's over now..." He said as he eventually gave in, and softly wrapped his arms around her, in a friendly, comforting hug. "You're safe!"

Cameron sniffled and giggled all at once, as she pried her face out of Gordon's chest and looked up at him with teary eyes and a bashful smile. "So, what is that - three, or four times that you've saved my life tonight?"

"Hey, I'm not! I'm just happy to help." Gordon reassured, reciprocating the grin, with a placid nod of his head, as he casually released her.

"Hmph." Cameron tittered under her breath, as she laid a hand upon his chest - tapping it with her fingers, as if she were keying a

piano. She gazed up at him with the countenance of a starry-eyed schoolgirl. Conversely, Gordon gulped, starting to feel a tad uncomfortable, as he leaned backward in recoil.

"I knew that you'd stop themâ€|" She said in a tender, seductive tone - slipping away into a daydream, as she ran her hand down his chest, tracing his sternum with her index finger. "And you know, for a guy over two-hundred, you don't look a day over twenty-five." She giggled, as she pulled her hand away and brushed a lock of her blonde-hair behind her ear.

"Uhâ€|" Gordon's voice cracked nervously, as he flashed an awkward grin, and took a few reeling, backwards steps. "Uh-hehehâ€| Y-y-you should see me in the morningsâ€|" He stuttered with his hands up in surrender, as Cam followed along - tracing every backpedaling step he took. "I'm quite the gruesome spectacle, I assure youâ€|"

"Mmm, is that an invitation? Because I'd love to see you in the mornings."

Gordon's eyes flashed for a moment with surprise and distress. He gulped as he backed himself up against one of the aquapods. ".L-listen!" He began with a fervent shake of his head, when he found himself cornered. "I-"

"Squad, move in!" "Go! Go! Go!" A pair of authoritative radio comms suddenly shouted out, startling Gordon, cutting him off, and coaxing him to draw his weapon on reflex, as a swarm of men in full, black and gray tactical armor stormed into the room, from the nearby staircase.

"Secure your positions!" One of the figures shouted into his radio, as he primed his assault rifle on Gordon, while the rest of his team fanned out throughout the entirety of the deck, with calculated precision.

The men moving in were all wearing the same armor - a bland set of monochromatic tactical vestments, dark grey in color, with a light camo pattern etched on their chests and leg plates. Their helmets concealed their faces in full, with a thin visor strip spanning across their eyes. Stamped into their left chests, and onto the crests of their helmets, was silvery emblem, representing the Systems Alliance Marine Corp. It was the stylized arch of the systems alliance, adorned with a combat knife, and two radiating lightning bolts, where it struck ground. Most were wearing the same armor. But two men stood out. One because of the distinctive blue armor he was equipped with, and the other because of his sheer size and mass. Both were the ones that had directly confronted Gordon.

"Stand down, civilian!" The uniquely armored soldier ordered in a voice muffled by his communicator, as he held his weapon trained on Gordon, while Freeman returned the favor. "Drop your weapon or we will be forced to open fire!"

The prominent soldier wore a set of armor that was bright blue, as opposed to the dull grey of the others, accented with a pair of white stripes running down the center of his chest. It was shinier than theirs too. Lustrous. Well cared for, and polished to a high sheen. And his helmet reflected the same. This man was clearly the superior.

"Clear!" "Clear!" "Clear!" A series of shouts began to emanate from around the loading bay, as the strike team spread throughout the room, like a plague. "We've got a casualty over here! Looks like one of the security team!"

Cameron huddled close beside Gordon, watching as the troop of soldiers fanned across the deck with surgical precision. Just then, she took notice of the silver emblems stamped into each of their chests.

"Dr. Freeman, it's okay!" Cameron fretfully assured - relieved, as she tugged on his arm a bit, trying to snap him out of his battle ready stance. "They're Alliance. They're the good guys. It's okay!"

Gordon's tunnel vision had blinded him, and his memories had deafened him to anything but the men before him. Men in helmets and camo-patterns like the ones who had killed his colleagues for sport, and sprayed "SURRENDER FREEMEN" on the walls, as they hunted him across Black Mesa. Men in armor, who were no longer men, but augmented abominations of Combine design, whose roving death squads purged the streets of City 17. He held his handgun up, in the face of a battalion, and nothing was going to make him drop it.

"Sir, this is your final warning!" The marine in blue asserted, with his weapon solidly aimed at Gordon's brow. "Drop your weapon or we will have no choice but to neutralize you with lethal force!"

"Doctor Freeman, you have to listen to them!"

Their words were gibberish in his ear, as he grit his teeth, and began to pull back on the trigger.

At that instant, a squashy sound heralded the arrival of the sopping wet Commander Shepard, as he flew down the stairs, and exploded into the room, to behold the standoff.

"Hey, whoa! Whoa! Hold it!" He demanded, as he rushed in and threw himself between Gordon and the line of Marines with his hands waving in the air. "Stand down! He's one of mine!"

Perhaps it was the blurry visage of a battered, wet figure, that had stepped in to defend him, or the familiar sound of Shepard's voice - but Gordon suddenly felt himself snap back into reality. He was out of the corridors of Black Mesa, off the streets of City 17, and back on the Illustria again. Lowering his weapon, he blinked his eyes rapidly, and shook his head, in a bit of a stupor.

"I'm John Shepard! Alliance Navy Lieutenant Commander and a Council Spectre!" John adamantly announced, with his hands still raised in a show of good faith.

"Oh, I don't think there's a man alive who doesn't know who you are, Shepard!" The prominent soldier at the fore of the lineup declared with a chuckle, in a gruff yet smooth voice, which was mildly muffled by the communicator in his helmet. He immediately lowered his rifle, collapsed it, and remounted it onto the weapons dock on his back, without hesitation.

"Stand down, Marines!" He shouted the order out, as John raised his eyebrow, at something familiar in the voice. "This area's secure!"

"...Kaidan?" Shepard dubiously put forth to the soldier in blue.

"Hmph!" He tittered a bit, as he raised his hands to the sides of his helmet. He released the pressurization locking clamps, causing it to hiss, as slowly withdrew it from his head.

"Hello, Commander!" Kaidan greeted, as his dapper and boyishly rugged face was revealed. "It's been a while. It's good to see you again."

"I knew I recognized that voice, Lieutenant!" John enthusiastically admitted, as he stepped up to his former crew member with his hand outstretched. "It's good to see you too!"

"Actually it's 'Major', now!" Kaidan modestly corrected.

"Heh, of course it is." John chuckled, reciprocating a respectful smile, as the two shook hands. After a momentary salutation, Shepard turned back around.

"Gordon. You alright?" He inquired, showing the proper concern for his teammate, and the civilian. "McClane?"

"Uh... Yeah." Gordon eventually acknowledged, seemingly still a bit addled from the experience. "Yeah, we're fine Shepard."

"All thanks to him." Cameron fawned, in a day-dreaming trance as her glued eyes seemed to pore over Gordon. "He saved my life."

"You're wounded!" Kaidan announced with an obvious sense of concern, upon noticing Gordon clutching a bloody gash near his hip. "You've been shot." He said again - opening and sifting through a compartment on his equipment belt, as he turned to a few of his subordinate marines standing to his left. "Get a medical unit down here on the double!"

"Yes sir." The helmeted soldier acknowledged, as he pressed two fingers to his radio to call for aid.

"No, it's alright." Gordon modestly assured, with a shake of his head. "The wound's superficial. Didn't hit anything vital. Just flesh."

"Well here, put this on it." Kaidan instructed, as he pulled out some sort of bandage, and peeled off a disposable paper seal. "Medi-gel patch." He informed, as he handed it to Gordon. Not one to reject a band-aid when available, Gordon readily took the small patch, pulled up the blood-soaked lower half of his shirt, and quickly affixed it to the afflicted area.

"We'll get a couple of stretchers down here for you. For both of you." He said adamantly, as he looked back and forth between Shepard and Freeman. "You both look like you've been through hell. And why are you all wet?!"

"Eh... Felt like taking a dip in the pool, and I forgot my trunks." John laughingly admitted with a sense of levity and pride that bordered on hubris. "Anyway, don't bother with the stretchers. We didn't need them after we took down the Reapers, and we don't need 'em now."

"To be honest John, I really could've used a stretcher back on Xen." Gordon admitted with a snicker, as a cooling and numbing sense of relief washed over his wound, when he finished affixing the medi-gel patch and lowered down his shirt. "And you look like you could seriously use one now."

Both men were battered, beaten, bloodied, and bruised. The cast previously concealing the healing wound on his arm was missing, and he a new hole in his abdomen now, but Shepard seemed to have taken the worst of it. He was vaguely recognizable beneath the swelling and contusions of his face. Blood from his mouth and nostrils mixed in with the water from his sopping wet face and clothing - leaving his once flawless white tuxedo shirt a pink stained mess, in tatters. He limped heavily when we walked, despite trying not to show it. And he was hunkered over to one side in a crooked state, as if it was too painful to stand up straight.

"Nah, not Commander Shepard!" The hulking soldier standing directly to Kaidan's right chimed in, as he casually stepped up to John with a reverent tone in his voice. He wore the same the same armor as all the other Alliance Marines, but his size made him stand out. His chest and arms were massive. He was clearly a hulking brute beneath those vestments. But there was one other thing that set him apart from the others - a badge which was magnetically affixed to his chest next to the stamped in 'Alliance Marines' emblem. It was a blue and silver badge adorned with the familiar outline of the SR-2 Normandy, on a star surrounded by the words: FOREVER NORMANDY.

"He's the toughest man that ever lived." The fawning soldier began again - the eyes beneath his visor reflecting praise and admiration, as he looked on at the stalwart Commander. "You know what they say? 'You can fight like a krogan, run like a leopard, but you'll never be better than Commander Shepard!'"

"...They do?" John beckoned, with a befuddled eyebrow raised. "Who says that?!"

"Everybody, since you took down the Reapers!"

"Heh." Kaidan chuckled. "Shepard, this is Lieutenant Vega, my second in Command." He introduced, laying a hand on Vega's shoulderpad, while the marine unclamped his helmet, and pulled it off. "We were stationed together at Fort Hopewell, in Vancouver when the Reaper attack came."

Vega was a bronze-skinned hispanic male, in his mid twenties. Despite his young age, his face was already etched with the grooves of various scars, from the battles he'd already seen. There were two that sliced across his lower lip, down his chin, with the most prominent one being a long, distinct track that ran from his right cheek, across the bridge of his nose.

"Yeah, we were part of the ground team, that tried to fight those

damn things off." The young soldier supplemented, as he cradled his helmet under his arm, like a basketball. "We would've all died, and never even made a dent, if you hadn't saved us again! Just like you did when you stopped the Collectors."

"We all did our part in the war against the Reapers, Lieutenant." John coyly admitted, with that classic, venerable, Shepard modesty. "We were just lucky enough to be where we needed to be to push back. But nevermind that now." He said, quickly dismissing the topic, as he turned back to Kaidan. "The rest of my crew is on this ship. They were contesting with the renegade security team up on the Promenade Deck. And Tali should've been on the bridge. Do you know if she's alright?"

"Yeah, Miranda too." Gordon quickly added, reflecting Shepard's concern. "She was headed for the bridge, with Tali. Is she safe?!"

"Ah, yes theâ€¦ Cerberus Woman." Kaidan awkwardly began, with a sense of distaste. "I see she's still with you. They're fine." He coolly assured, assuaging their fears. "All of them. The bridge and Promenade Deck are secure. We've already started unloading the hostages, and we're rounding up the last of the rogue security guards as we speak. So far they're the only casualties we've come across. But your crew is fine.

John and Gordon both seemed to breath a sigh of relief, as a look of what could almost be described as disappointment came over Cameron's face.

"I spoke with Tali a bit, and I'm looking forward to seeing Garrus again." Kaidan admitted, with a titter. "He always used to crack me up. But you, I hadn't met before." He said, as he turned to face Gordon. "I take it you're the new edition to Shepard's crew?"

"That'd be meâ€¦" Gordon admitted, as he fidgeted a bit, succumbing to his usual bouts of social awkwardness.

"Good to meet you." The Major amicably admitted, as he stretched out a hand to be shaken. "I'm Kaidan."

"...Gordon." The physicist bashfully reciprocated, as the two briefly shook hands.

Kaidan forced a smile as an awkward silence settled in when the two pulled away. "Would you excuse me?" Kaidan said, eventually breaking the silence, as he turned back to John. "Commander, can I have quick word?"

Shepard acceded with a nonchalant nod, as he and Kaidan took a few steps away, side by side.

"Is he uhâ€¦ He Cerberus too?" The Lieutenant queried with an uneasy whisper, as he subtly pointed towards Gordon, over his shoulder.

John laughed. "No, he's not."

"Ahâ€¦" Kaidan tittered and sighed all at once, relieved. "Well I

like him better already." He jovially admitted. "Is he Alliance?"

"Nope."

"...Mercenary?"

"Nuh-Uh."

Kaidan stood silent for a moment, furrowing a perplexed brow after he failed to guess Gordon's previous vocation. "He's not a pirate, is he...?"

"Kaidanâ€¦" Shepard started, with a chuckle, as he gave his former crew member a pat on the back. "Let's just say, for nowâ€¦ You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Fair enoughâ€¦" The Lieutenant reluctantly accepted. "I guess the less I know the better. But uhmâ€¦ Listen. I wanted to ask." He continued, as his tone grew somber and austere. "How are you, Shepard? Really, I mean. How are you holding up, afterâ€¦ Well, everything. You knowâ€¦"

John sighed and grinned. "Well, after me and my team got beaten to a pulp, on Xen-" He began, shrugging, a bit jocund. "-I figured we'd finally get to unwind with an extravagant vacationâ€¦ And you can see how that turned out." He said sarcastically, coaxing a chuckle out of both of them. "No but, all things considered, I'm good, Kaidan." John admitted, unable to help the smile on his face, as he nodded earnestly. "Great, actually. Sure, I may have a herniated disk, some cracked ribs, and I think I need a tetanus shot-" He joked, though somewhat truthful, as he draped his right hand over a gnawed gash in his left shoulder. "But I feel glad to be alive. Especially considering all that we went through."

"Yeah, I know what you meanâ€¦" Kaidan sighed ruefully, as he rubbed the back of his neck with one hand. "I wish I could've been there with youâ€¦"

"I could've used you there, Kaidanâ€¦" John contritely admitted. "But, after the last time we spoke-"

"I knowâ€¦" Kaidan interjected, cutting Shepard off before he could finish. "Back on Horizon... That's actually what I wanted to talk to you about." He said, turning his eyes to the floor, as his expression was suddenly overcome with shame. "When you asked me to come with you, I refused becauseâ€¦" He paused, biting down on his lips, as he struggled to get the words out. "Because, I wasn't sure I trusted you anymore. I sure as hell didn't trust Cerberusâ€¦"

"I worked WITH Cerberus, Kaidan, not FOR themâ€¦" The Commander adamantly put forth, with a rigid finger raised. "And the only reason I did so is because they were the only ones trying to do ANYTHING about the Reapersâ€¦ They were the only ones, with the resources, that would listen!"

"I knowâ€¦ Believe me, I know Shepardâ€¦" Alenko acceded with a nod - the guilt on his face growing even more distinct, as he put his hands up in resignation. "And I'm sorry I ever doubted you. It'll be the last time I ever do. I know now that everything you do, you do it for

the greater good. For the good of the galaxyâ€¦" He affirmed, practically groveling with humility. "I'll never question you again, Shepard. I swear."

"Hmphâ€¦" John chortled - bowing and shaking his head, as he placed his hands akimbo on his hips. "Well, I appreciate that, Kaidan-" He admitted, as he looked up and laid a consoling hand on the Major's shoulderpad. "-but I don't expect you to just blindly agree with me every time, no matter whatâ€¦"

"You're a great soldier, Kaidan." He continued. "And you remember what Anderson used to say about great soldiersâ€¦"

"Yeahâ€¦" The Major acknowledged, with a forlorn smile. "A good soldier does nothing but follow orders. But a great soldier is only humanâ€¦"

Both men forced dejected smiles that quickly faded. Their eyes sank, as they slipped into a pensive silence before Kaidan finally broke it again.

"Anywayâ€¦" He said, shrugging and shaking his head dismissively. "We got some catching up to do, but we can get to that later. Let's get you guys outta here!" He announced - motioning with his head for Shepard and Freeman to follow, as he made his way to the nearby stairway.

"We're docking the ship with the Citadel as we speak." He continued, with Gordon, John, Cameron, James, and a handful of other Alliance soldiers in tow. "There's an emergency exit we can use one floor up."

When they reached the opened doorway leading to the stairs, Kaidan stopped and turned back around. "...You sure you guys don't want a stretcher, or maybe a wheelchair or something?"

Shepard stepped up to Kaidan. He didn't say anything, he just snickered and his lips curled up into a cocky smile, as he proceeded on past him, and ascended the stairs.

"Same ol' Shepardâ€¦" Kaidan muttered to himself, grinning and shaking his head, as he turned back to Gordon and Cameron. "Alright then, well. Follow me."

The small party ascended the stairs at a slow and steady pace. Gordon had to look down as he walked, and held on tight to the handrail, as without his glasses or his visor, he was just a stone's throw from having the keen eyesight of a mole. Just then, he heard one of the soldier's heavy laden armored boots stomp its way up, as Vega rushed to align himself with him.

"Soâ€¦" James began, attempting to make conversation with Gordon. "You're on Shepard's crew, eh?"

"Uhâ€¦ Yeah." Gordon stiffly responded, keeping his eyes turned towards the ground.

"So, what's that like?" The brawny soldier beckoned, beaming an inquisitive smile. "Working with the great Commander Shepard himself?"

"Uhmâ€¦ Fine, I guessâ€¦" Gordon offered up, with an indecisive shrug. "It'sâ€¦ uhmâ€¦ rewarding?" He fumbled to reply, seemingly searching for the most appropriate answer.

"Yeahâ€¦" Vega acknowledged, lookin and pretending to be interested in the wall, as he considered another topic of conversation. "Soâ€¦" He eventually began again, with a jovial tone and a friendly grin. "Do you lift?" He asked, as he flexed his arms back and forth from his chest. "You know - pump iron?"

"Uhâ€¦" Was again the first utterance out of Gordon's mouth, as eloquence was never one of his strong suits. "Well, Iâ€¦ I try to stay fit, if that's what you mean." He casually disclosed. "Used to do a lot of cardio. But I'mâ€¦ Well, I'm not exactly the, the-" He stammered, as he pointed at James' strapping, sinewy arms. "Well you know, the muscle bound typeâ€¦ I mean, no, you knowâ€¦ yeahâ€¦?"

"Oh, Yeah, yeah. Of courseâ€¦" James awkwardly acceded, as he turned and whistled a quick tune.

Gordon, despite his social aversions, quickly realized how he must've been coming off to this man, who, for all intents and purposes, was there to help and was trying to be friendly.

"Ahem, Soâ€¦" He cleared his throat, and forced himself to converse. "You're a soldier, huh?"

"Yepâ€¦ Nine years in the Alliance Navy." James enthusiastically replied, with a resonating sense of pride in his voice. "Lieutenant First Class."

"Wow, that'sâ€¦ That's good, right?" Gordon replied, unsure if he should sound impressed. "How's that working out for you?"

"Oh, I love it." Vega declared, without qualm. "There's nothing I'm more proud of. I mean, sometimes there are things you have to do in this line of work-" He admitted, as they turned the corner on the first set of stairs, and ascended the second, towards an opened exit. "-Things you have to live with that make you wonder whether or not you did the right thing by enlisting. But at the end of the day, when you realize you're doing your own small part to make the galaxy safer, it makes it all worthwhile."

"That's admirable, sir." Gordon imparted, with a look and timber of sincerity. The look faded rather quickly though, as he bit down on his lips, and bowed and shook his head. "Justâ€¦ Don't ever kill any innocent people, or anything like that."

James chortled at the ridiculous thought. "Why would we kill innocent people?" He asked, with traces of laughter still evident in his voice. "We're not some mercenary group, we're the Alliance Military."

"Let's just say I've seen it happen beforeâ€¦"

James studied Freeman, as they were led out of the stairway, and down the hall by Kaidan and Shepard, who were enthralled by a conversation of their own.

"You know, I didn't catch your name!" The burly Marine said, as his eyes studied the stoic physicist, from top to bottom. "Mine's James Vega." He divulged - extending his hand out to Gordon as they continued on.

Gordon turned to face the soldier once more, and glanced down at the awaiting hand. He beamed a crooked grin, as he looked back up, and accepted.

"Gordon Freeman." He said, as they shook.

"Hah! Gordon Freeman!" James inadvertently let out a boisterous cackle. "That's pretty funny." He said. "Did your parents wanna name you after?" He suddenly stopped dead, mid-sentence, as he noticed something peculiar. "Hmmm! Que extraño!" He muttered to himself, in spanish, as he framed Gordon with his fingers, as if trying to distinguish something. "You know I just noticed you actually really do-"

"-Look like him?" Gordon offered up with a smirk, finishing James' sentence for him

"Yeah! A lot like him, actually!"

Gordon grinned and sighed all at once. "Yeah, I get that!"

The group came to a wide doorway, tucked away into a rear, non-descript section of the deck. It was marked with slanted black and yellow caution stripes, and massive, painted lettering which spelled out EMERGENCY EXIT - ALARM WILL SOUND in words that practically leapt off hatch.

"We should be the last ones off the ship." Kaidan explained, as he stepped forward, and turned the large, metallic wheel nestled in the center of the hatch. "Don't worry - we've disabled the fire alarms." A loud thud resonated, as the locking mechanisms on the door disengaged. With a sturdy push on Kaidan's part, the door creaked open, revealing a short jetway, and a chorus of agitated voices, blended together into one, loud, indiscernible uproar.

The group proceeded through the jetway, which emptied out into one of the C-Sec stations, on the Citadel, which was utterly packed to capacity and beyond, by a jumbled mass of rescued hostages and frantic C-Sec Police Officers, scrambling to get everyone processed, and regain some semblance of order.

"Look mommy, that's them!" A tiny little voice pertaining to the little asari girl, who nearly fell prey to the egregious appetites of a greedy volus and his krogan accomplice, announced - tugging on her asari mother's hand, as she was the first to spot the company of figures that stepped out of the Illustria. The girl's mother, and her wounded salarian father, whose arm was now cradled in a white sling, turned and beheld the five.

"Look! There they are!" The salarian shouted in an outburst of glee and veneration. He caught the attention of a few people next to him, coaxing them to turn. This started a contagious chain reaction. Almost in an instant, a deafening silence fell upon the once bustling and chaotic C-Sec station, as every eye fell upon Shepard and

Freeman.

"It's them! The ones who saved us!"

All of a sudden, the ruckus erupted once more, but instead of being a fervent roar of chatter and murmurs, it was applause! The massive assembly of freed captives exploded into an upheaval of grateful and indebted cheers and claps. Kaidan smiled, as he and James took point, and began leading Gordon, Shepard, and Cameron through the praising crowd, which split before them like the parting Red Sea.

As they passed by, the asari girl's salarian father actually rushed in, and threw his arms around Shepard, giving him a kiss on the cheek, as he embraced him. The Commander laughed. He returned the embrace with a quick pat on the back, nodded, and continued on.

People within the thankful congregation would actually step out of line, patting Gordon and Shepard on the back.

"Thank you! THANK YOU!" An obliged turian stepped forth, grabbing one of Gordon's hands, and shaking it with a grateful zeal. There were actually tears of joy flooding from his eyes.

"Uh! Y-your welcome." Gordon stuttered in response.

"Goddess bless you both!" An asari proclaimed.

"You have this ones thanks, humans!" Bestowed a hanar.

"With grateful elation: thank you humans!" Added a humble elcor.
"We are forever in your debt."

"Thank you, earth clans!" A miniscule volus submitted, as he stepped forward with a wife and child of the same species. "How can we ever repay you?!"

"Uh! Gl-glad I could help." Freeman admitted, as dumbfounded smile grew on his face.

The whole experience was like a surreal dream for him. He looked around as people pumped their fists into the air and clapped their hands over their heads - the ovation was their song of freedom, their ode to victory. Never in his life had he been faced with a crowd of this magnitude - especially not one where he was the center of attention. By all logic, and with his history of social anxiety, he should've been reduced to a pale face, quivering mass of flesh, trying to find an escape like a hermit crab retreating into its shell. But it wasn't fear or anxiety that had come over him now. As he felt the grateful hands on his shoulders, and the pats on his back, what he felt more than anything else at that moment, was a shiver of joy.

"Alright, alright! Give 'em some room, people!" Kaidan entreated, though not sounding all that serious, as he pushed through the crowd. "Come on! Give 'em some room here!"

"Excuse me, Miss!" A salarian Police Officer, donned in a dark blue C-Sec uniform stepped out from the crowd, and took a hold of Cameron's arm, detaining her, while Gordon and Shepard went on. "If

you just come with me, this way, we'll get you processed and on your way."

"Uh-No! Wait! I'm with them!" Cameron insisted, as she pointed towards Gordon and Shepard, who were already disappearing into the crowd. "I wanna stay with them!"

"I'm sorry ma'am, but we need all civilians to step this way for processing."

"No! I'm telling you, I'm with them!" She aggressively maintained, as she continued trying to tear herself away. "Look, he'll tell you!" She asserted, as she bounced up on the balls of her feet, and waved her hand in the air. "Doctor Freeman! DOCTOR FREEMAN!" She called out, desperately trying to garner his attention - but their visages had already been swallowed up by the crowd. She could just make out their heads and the tops of their shoulders, as they were led past a line of C-Sec officers cordoning off a back part of the station from the hostages, and the rest of the crowd. Cameron watched as, just then, John and Gordon were met by a lovely quarian and a battered brunette, in a scarlet dress. They all rushed towards each other - greeting their better halves with an eager, passionate embrace. They seemed to share concern over each other's new wounds and trauma, but they were happy to be alive, thrilled to be reunited, and from where Cameron was standing, very much in love.

"Dr. Freeman!" She uttered, saddened and defeated - letting her outstretched hand fall, as a dejected look washed over her expression. At that moment, she went listless - resigning herself to the officer and the flow crowd.

"That's it." The salarian officer cheerfully encouraged, as he led her to a jumble of haphazardly formed lines, where frantic C-Sec officers with omni-tools and datapads took names and information to assure the safety and accountability of every passenger on the Illustria's manifest.

The pep had been immediately sapped from Cameron. She allowed herself to get dragged into a line, but she never took her eyes away from the cordoned off back section of the station.

"Alrighty, Miss." The neighborly officer began again, as he released Cameron. "Just wait here in this line, and we'll get to you as soon as possible. Don't you worry. By this time tomorrow this whole ordeal will be nothing but a bad memory." He grinned, and walked away to address other disorderly conduct, leaving a melancholy Cameron behind.

"Golly!" She despondently said to herself - fighting the quiver of her lips and the tremble of her chin, as a tight knot wedged itself into her throat. "Usually when stuff like this happens in the movies, the hero gets the girl at the end!" They never show what happens when the hero already HAS a girl!"

43. Chapter 43: Homecoming Part II

Salvation: Episode I - The Taking of the Carmenta Illustria

Disclaimer: This fan-fiction is part of an episodic series taking place after Salvation: A Half-Life/Mass Effect Universe Fan Fiction, which will lead directly to its sequel, Salvation II: Project Prometheus. These episodes and sequel take place OUTSIDE of the Mass Effect 3 continuity. Characters property of their respective companies, Half-Life created by Valve and Mass Effect created by Bioware.

****Chapter 43: Homecoming Part II****

****Loose Ends****

"Garrus!" Jacob called out, as he tried to force his way through the ravenous crowd, towards a turian who stood leaning against a wall, refusing to get sucked in.

"Garrus, have you seen Vanessa?!" He asked, with a pressing sense of urgency in his voice, despite his attempts to sound casual. "We got separated when we disembarked. I lost her in the crowd."

"Ah, the bathing beauty." Garrus suggested, as he coyly bounced his eyebrows. "Don't worry, she'll turn up. A girl like that tends to stick out in a crowd. And from what I saw, she's bound to be looking for you too, you sly varrenâ€|"

"You think?!" Jacob exclaimed in an outburst, with wide-eyed enthusiasm. "I meanâ€| Well, I just wanted to make sure she was okay, you know?"

"Yeah, yeahâ€|" Garrus impartially dismissed, with an indifferent shake of his head, as he waved Jacob over to him. "Anyway, come over here a second. Take a look at this." He insisted, as he pointed out, over the crowd. Jacob joined him against the wall, and turned in the direction the turian indicated.

The entire floor was packed - thronged with a sea of liberated hostages, dancing, cheering, and embracing in joyous celebration. But past the group, at the rear of the large, yet overflowing, Citadel Security Police Station, were John, Gordon, Tali, and Miranda. The thing that had caught Garrus' eye was the way the two human males seemed to carry themselves. Both had cuts and bruises, busted lips, bleeding noses, bloodshot eyes, gunshot wounds, as well as possible fractures and concussions. Yet, their expressions beamed with optimism and joy, as the sea of life surrounding them gravitated in their direction, trying to push through a line of police officers just to catch a glimpse, or lay a hand upon their valiant saviors.

"Would you look at those two?" Garrus said, with a cheerful disposition, as he shook his head.

"Who? Shepard and Freeman?"

"Yeah."

"What about 'em?" Jacob asked, shrugging and furrowing his brow.

"I dunno. There's just something about 'emâ€|" Garrus replied with a pensive sigh. "It's like they were born to do this."

Jacob smiled. "Wellâ€¦" He began, leaning against the wall, with his arms crossed. "Maybe they wereâ€¦"

Just then Jacob spotted a woman with frazzled black hair, and a large, tan sport coat, sifting her way through the crowd, with her head swiveling back and forth, as if she were searching for someone.

"Gotta go!" Jacob excused himself forthwith, as he abruptly plunged back into the crowd. Garrus shook his head and laughed, as he leaned back against the wall, and crossed his legs.

"Shepardâ€¦" Kaidan extended a hand to be shaken, as he prepared to part ways. "I gotta be off. It was great to see you again, but we still got work to do. Need to check in with my other teams - make sure the ship is secure, and that we got everyone off safely."

"Of course." John understandingly acknowledged, as the two shared a hearty handshake. "It was damn good to see you again, Kaidan. Keep in touch."

"You know I will, Shepard." The Major assured, as they pulled away. "Stay safe out there." He turned to Gordon, extending a hand as he flashed a hospitable grin. "And it was a pleasure to meet you as well, sir." He declared, as the Doctor readily accepted the gesture and shook. "I'm sure we'll be seeing each other again soon."

"I look forward to it." Gordon bestowed with a grin.

As the two pulled away, James stepped in with the blithe eagerness of a child, and took hold of Gordon's hand. "It was good to meet you, buddy!" Vega proclaimed, with a toothy grin, as he rapidly shook Gordon's hand. "Take care, and remember to keep hittin' that gym!"

"Uhâ€¦ Sure thing, heh!" Gordon chuckled nervously, in response. When the two separated, James quickly turned to Shepard, reached out, and took his hand - sandwiching between both his palms.

"And Commander!" He began, as he latched on with both hands, shaking with an enthused vigor. "I just wanna say, you've always been something of a hero to me. For as long as I've been following your military career - your deployment to Akuze, your hunt for Saren, the Battle of the Citadel, stopping the Collectors, and your victory over the Reapers-" He continued - never stopping his zealous handshake for a second, as he went through the entire litany. "-I justâ€¦ Finally getting to meet you wasâ€¦ Well, it was an honor beyond words, sir!"

"Alright, alright. At ease, Lieutenant." The Commander said in a voice mired with laughter, with a smile etched on his face, as he patted James on the side of his shoulderpad. "It was an honor to meet you too."

"Officer on deck!" Kaidan's voice suddenly rang out from behind Vega, as he snapped to attention.

James quickly yanked his hand away and stood to one side, revealing the visage of a haggard old warrior, in a highly decorated uniform, stepping into the station. Vega about-faced, and all three men

snapped to attention, with all the semblance of a lamppost. Gordon studied the seemingly contagious condition of the James, Kaidan, and Shepard, as this gruff old soldier came into view. He walked with an air of esteem about him. His hands were clasped behind his back, shoulders up, chest jutted out, and his chin held high.

His uniform was more decorated than others he'd seen - his chest was a brightly colored collage of pins, badges, and medals - none of which he had the slightest hope of interpreting. His sky-blue eyes were partially obscured - overshadowed by the brim of his dark blue naval cap. He had salt and pepper hair, evident by his sideburns. And the mustache and goatee framing his mouth and chin were not all that dissimilar from Gordon's. But his most pronounced feature was the deep groove of an old scar, which ran down from his right cheek, to his upper lip.

Gordon leaned over to Miranda, not taking his eyes off of this figure of obviously considerable importance.

"...Should I be saluting too?" He asked in a whisper.

Miranda scoffed, as she crossed her arms and turned her face away, as if refusing to acknowledge the officer's presence. "Why?" She queried, with a heavy hint of resentment in her voice. "I don't salute Alliance. Alliance never did anything for me."

Torn between what to do, Gordon thought it best to just stand fast, and stay quiet.

"At ease Major. Lieutenant!" The decorated officer excused James and Kaidan, as he stepped into the station, and approached Shepard. "As you were."

"Sir!" James and Kaidan both respectfully acknowledged, lowering their saluting hands to their sides, and proceeding out of the station, with the utmost discipline and stoicism.

The haggard old soldier walked up to Shepard, who still held his hand to his brow, in the midst of a salute, seeing as he had, himself, not been excused yet.

Hackett grinned, as he looked on at Shepard. "At ease, Commander." He finally acquitted.

"Admiral." John respectfully greeted, as he lowered his hand, and clasped them behind his back, whilst keeping his rigid and disciplined posture.

"Hell of a thing you've done here, Commander." Hackett cheerfully admitted, as he glanced over Shepard's shoulder, towards the thronged masses of lifeforms crowded and bustling in the customs section of the C-Sec station, while a handful of C-Sec officers tried to keep them orderly, and out of the back area. "The entire ship back, safe and sound. And not a single civilian casualty, other than members of the rogue security crew, from what I've heard in the initial report."

"That's not entirely accurate, sir." John disclosed, with a heavy hearted timbre. "I'm afraid there was one casualty. The ship's Captain, Arthur Ryback. He was executed by the perpetrators when the

ship was seized."

"Hmmâ€|" Hackett muttered softly to himself, immersed in rueful thought. "I knew Ryback." He dejectedly admitted. "He was a good man. We served two tours together, back before First Contact. He deserved better than to die at the hands of these treacherous snakesâ€|" He declared, with disdain, as he turned and looked on to his left.

A few feet away, several dozen officers, bearing Illustria Security Team uniforms were being escorted away in handcuffs, by C-Sec Police, to a back part of the station. Their heads drooped over their chests, in defeat, and they dragged their feet across the floor, as they were shoved along. At the very least, most of them had to be thankful to not be among those being carted in, in black body bags, by Citadel Medical Personnel - but one figure in particular may have preferred it that way. He easily stood out from the rest - an emasculated quarian in a burgundy veil and faceplate, walking flaccid and listless, as if the sun would never shine againâ€|

"Wellâ€|" Hackett continued, shaking his head as he turned back to Shepard. "At the very least Ryback can rest knowing his death has been vindicated. I'll notify his husband and next of kin personally." He assured, causing Gordon to raise a mildly surprised eyebrow.

"But it seems you can't even take a proper vacation, without stopping to save a couple thousand lives, Commander." Hackett added - the cheerful bounce in his voice returning somewhat.

"Just doing my job, Admiral." Shepard modestly attested. "And as usual, I had some help."

"Well, I wish every soldier had your definition of 'just doing your job.'" The decorated officer said, smiling over at Shepard while gravitating towards Tali, next to him.

"Admiral Zorah-" He greeted her, coaxing Tali to briefly glance over at Shepard with a perplexed look in her eyes. John's response was an equally confused, but subtle shrug.

"-Might I say, it is a distinguished honor to finally meet you." He began, as he removed his cap, placed it over his heart, and saluted the quarian with a dignified bow. "You know, I've heard a great deal about you, but I believe this the first time we've been formally introduced, which is inexcusable on my part." He remarked, as he nestled his naval cap under his left arm, and extended his right for a handshake. "I'm Stephen Hackett."

"Yes. Of course I know who you are, Admiral." Tali replied, reciprocating the gesture with a congruent show of respect. "It's nice to finally meet you face to face."

"Likewise, my dear." The Admiral affirmed with a congenial grin, before glancing over at Shepard. "You know Commander, as an Alliance Navy Man, fraternization with other ranked military officials is strictly off-limits." He jokingly reprimanded, with a sly gleam in his eye. "But seeing as she's not actually Alliance - I think we can let it slideâ€|"

"...Thank you, sir." Came Shepard's feigned response.

At that moment, Hackett glanced over to the battered human couple standing nearby - neither of which seemed too keen on being noticed by the high ranking military official. But his eyes were immediately drawn to the familiar visage of the alabaster skinned brunette, with hair of black pitch.

"And this sanguine young lady must be none other than the infamous Miranda Lawson." Hackett affirmed in a deadpan tone - casually floating towards her, as Miranda's head turned with a jerk; eyes wide open with shock and surprise.

"One of Cerberus' top operatives." The Admiral elaborated with a stony expression, and a stringent voice, as he came face to face with the brunette. "Yes, we know exactly who you are, Ms. Lawson." He nodded. "The Alliance is better informed than you may think. And we've got a rather extensive file on you. I know because I, myself, have pored over it personally."

John's eyes grew wide with concern, while Gordon's seemed to narrow defensively, with his brow furrowed tight.

"Espionage, grand larceny, unauthorized experimentation, development of illegal AIs - I must say, you're quite high on our 'most wanted' list, my dear."

"A file?! Most wanted list?!" Gordon muttered to himself, as he involuntarily clenched his fist to the point of whitening his knuckles, without realizing it.

"Does this mean I'm to be taken in - 'Admiral'?" Miranda asked, perfectly serene and collected - exhibiting a quiet and dignified sense of resignation, despite the poignant fear and disdain that reflected in her eyes.

"Sir, she's no longer with Cerberus!" Shepard anxiously interjected, without qualm. "I can attest to that. She's been a devoted member of my crew for some time now, and I'll personally claim full respon-

"That's quite enough, Shepard." Hackett sternly rebuked, turning to the stammering Commander, and abruptly silencing him with a hand up.

John gulped back his words, with no choice but to submit. "Sir -" He said, bowing his head.

"What it means, dear lady-" The Admiral began again, speaking benevolently, as the sides of his lips slowly curled up into a smile. "-is that we'll have to do something about getting that record of yours expunged." Miranda's eyebrows bounced, with admitted astonishment, at the Officer's tremendous show of clemency. "Shepard's obviously seen virtue in you, and the galaxy owes you a debt. Your past doesn't matter anymore. What matters is what you'll do tomorrow."

"Oh - Well, thank you Admiral." Miranda replied, taken aback, and trying to hide the traces of the gleeful laughter in her voice. "That's - That's very generous of you! I don't know what to say -"

"Say nothing of it." Hackett instructed, with a wink "It'll be our little secret."

The quartet all seemed to breath a collective sigh of relief, after tensions momentarily rose. Excusing himself from Miranda's sight with a bow, the Admiral's attention naturally turned to Gordon.

"And who is this young soldier, Commander?" He queried. "I thought I'd met, or was at least familiar with most of your crew."

Gordon did his best to give his face to the imperious man before him. Their eyes met, though he'd still intermittently glance away, nervous and awkward.

"He's actually not a soldier, Admiral." John began to explain on his behalf. "This is--"

"--Gordon Freeman, sir." The reserved physicist unexpectedly interjected, extending his hand towards the noble officer.

"Well, now there's a patriotic human name if I ever heard one!" Hackett declared, with a hearty chuckle, as he took Gordon's hand with a firm grip. "Named after history's greatest hero. I like that."

"Ahem." Shepard cleared his throat, as the two men shook. "Actually, this IS history's greatest hero, sir." He guardedly and indecisively began to elaborate. "As in this is 'the One Free Man, the Opener of the Way, Leader of the Earth Rebellion against the Combine Invasion of the 21st century', Gordon Freeman!"

Gordon felt Hackett's grip suddenly go limp. He blinked, the way the light on a computer does when trying to process information, as he turned to Shepard. "...You wanna run that by me one more time, son?"

"Well sir, it's a long story." Shepard shrugged, as he looked down and rubbed the back of his neck. "But the long and short of it, is--"

Shepard began doing his best to regale Admiral Stephen Hackett with the abridged version of the The One Free Man's second coming. Meanwhile, a short distance away, just outside the central part of the station, a strapping young operative made his way towards a lovely maiden, with eyes of sparkling amethyst, enrobed in a sport coat, and a bath towel, lost in the center of the bustling crowd.

"Vanessa!" Jacob called out, waving one hand in the air above the crowd, as he tried to catch her attention. But the sound of his voice was mostly snuffed out by the raucous clamor of rabble in the room.

"VANESSA!" His second, much louder attempt achieved greater success, as the scarcely dressed businesswoman began swiveling her head around, back and forth, at the sound of her name. Finally she wriggled her way around in the crowd, and turned to see Jacob cutting his way through her.

"Mr. Taylor!" She greeted, with a euphoric smile, as the two finally

met up at the center of the ocean of life forms.

"Hey!" He said. His first instinct was to reach out and take her hand. But cautious not to overstep his boundaries, he wrung them around instead, as if he were lathering them up with soap. "I was worried I was gonna lose you!"

"What?!" She said, practically shouting, as the murmur of the crowd drilled in their ears.

"I said I was worried I was gonna lose you!" Jacob loudly reiterated. "I didn't want you to leave without getting to see you one last time!"

"I'm sorry! You wanted to do WHAT one last time?!" She said, as she turned her ear towards Jacob, cupping her hand around it.

"Ugh!" He grunted hopelessly, as he let his shoulders sag. "Come with me!" He decisively urged, as he took her by the hand and led her towards the cordoned off back area of the police station. "Excuse me please! Coming through! One side!" He insisted aloud, as they shoved their way through sardine packed crowd. After a bit of contention, he finally reached the officers blocking the entryway to the much more quiet and serene area of the police station, where Shepard was avidly engaged in conversation with a skeptical Admiral Hackett.

"Sorry, sir!" A turian officer at the center of the blockade rebuffed his passage, with a hand held up. "No civilians allowed beyond this point."

"It's alright, Officer. I'm Jacob Taylor." The strapping young operative assured, with an artfully casual tone that seemed to tickle Vanessa's fancy. "I'm sure you've seen me in the news vids. I'm a member of Commander Shepard's crew."

"Well, uhâ€¦"

"Hey, go ahead and ask 'em if you don't believe me." He offered, with his hand outstretched over the the Officer's shoulder, towards the engaged Shepard and Hackett. "Butâ€¦ That's not exactly a conversation I'D want to interrupt."

The turian officer turned and looked back at the two prominent, and highly influential humans engaged in what seemed to be a conversation of the utmost significance.

"Uh, no that uhâ€¦ That won't be necessary." He stuttered in response, as he turned back to Jacob. "As a matter of fact, yes! I- I have seen you in the- In the uhâ€¦ J-just go right on through." He insisted, as he stood aside allowing the two human's passage.

"Yeah, you better move, buster!" Vanessa added, in passing, as she shook a mocking finger in the turian's face. "I buy and sell people like you, every day!"

The turian rolled his eyes and shook his head, stepping back into place, just as a young blonde-haired woman stepped up, trying to slip in with the couple.

"Ah-ah! Hold it!" The turian deterred, with his hand raised in

Cameron's face. "Where do you think you're going? There's no civilians allowed beyond this point."

"I'm not a civilian, I'm with them!" Cameron tried to persuade, as she rose to the balls of her feet for a peek at the events transpiring within. "I'm one of Shepard's crew!"

"Yeah, sure you are, lady!" The turian sarcastically chided, as he crossed his arms, and looked down condescendingly "You know, I've seen YOU in the vids, too."

"You have?!" Cameron exclaimed, with a sudden outburst of joyful excitement

"Yeah. You're one of those second rate reporters that does those mediocre news stories." He scoffed. "Last time I saw you on HV, you were talking about the 'widespread ramifications of littering'."

"Oh, and I suppose you support litterbugs, 'officer'!?" She irately rebuked, with a sarcastic timbre to emphasize his title.

"No. But you're still not getting in here."

"Aw, come on!" Cameron pleaded, like a pouty child, as her shoulders sagged, and she threw her head back. "Look at my face!" She demanded, pointing at the knot on her forehead from an assault rifle butt, and at the swelling wilt on her cheek from Kim's slap. "I was part of this! I deserve to be in there getting the scoop!"

"Problems, McClane?" An arrogant, patronizing female voice of some familiarity suddenly rang in Cameron's ear, coaxing her to spin around and greet its source.

"Khalisah!" Cam stated, with a sour look on her face, and a bitter taste in her mouth.

The woman before her was none other than well-known Westerlund News Journalist; Khalisah Bint Sinan al-Jilani - infamous for grilling her subjects with salvos of hard-hitting, controversial questions. She had green, judgemental eyes, short black hair, and was donned in a blue and red dress, accented by gleaming golden stripes, as she carried a large, tan leather bag, almost completely resembling the type used to carry bowling balls in.

"What are you doing here?!" Cameron imposed, with instant derision.

"There's a hot story here, and you have to ask?" Khalisah snickered back, with a cynical shrug.

"But this is MY story!" Cam sulked, with a long face, as she pointed a thumb into her chest. "I lived it! I SURVIVED it!"

"Beat it, McClane!" Al-Jilani derided, motioning with her head for Cam to step aside. "Leave the real stories to the real reporters. I heard an Ambassador's cat is stuck up a tree, on the Presidium. Why don't you go report on that?" She mocked, as she stepped around the blonde-haired journalist, up to the two officers standing sentry.

"They're not gonna let you in, Khalisah!" Cam assured with certainty, as she crossed her arms and up-turned her nose. "You're wasting your time."

"Good evening Officers Dalris, and Albaston!" Al-Jilani began with the guise of a kindly young woman, as she clasped her hands together and beamed a wide, disingenuous smile at the turian and salarian sentries. "You're both looking quite well tonight. How are the families? I trust my contributions to C-Sec's many functions have gone towards helping keep them happy and comfortable, eh? What do you say I just slip through here unnoticed, and get a little peek of what's going on inside, hmm?" She daintily petitioned with a sprightly wink.

The salarian and turian blocking the door shared a brief glance, followed by an uneasy shrug. At that moment, they both intentionally turned their attention away from the entrance they were duty-bound to guard. They subtly stood to one side and pretended to yawn or be distracted, which granted Khalisah the license to squeeze her way through, along with her bag, without difficulty.

"You two are just dolls!" She said, from the other side, as the two officers stepped back into place; leaving Cameron with an amalgam of shock, disgust, and resentment on her face. "I'll be sure to think of you when making my donation to the C-Sec Policeman's ball this year. Thanks again!"

Cameron stood there, eyes peeled wide, and mouth hanging open like a drawbridge, as Khalisah rushed into the room.

"Yâ€|. Y-Yâ€| Youâ€| HOW DARE YOU TWO!" She exploded, in an irate fit. "Shame on you! Just you wait!" She admonished, as she waved a stiff finger in both their faces. "Unless you let me in RIGHT NOW, I'm going to write a brutal exposÃ© about corruption and bribery in C-Sec! That'll teach you!"

"Lady, did you see us take some kind of bribe?" The turian queried, in a deadpan tone.

"Noâ€| But, it was heavily implied!"

"What can we say to heavily imply that we want you to get lost. You're not getting in here, and we've got prisoners coming in, so either get lost or get tazed!"

Garrus looked on, shrugging and shaking his head a bit as he watched some sort of indiscernible commotion going on where the main part of the station connected to the back area. He pondered on what could be happening, when he noticed a stream of rogue *Illustria* Security guards, in handcuffs, being brought in by Alliance Officials.

"DAMN IT! HOW MANY TIMES DO I HAVE TO TELL YOU I'M NOT WITH THEM!" One of their voices bellowed out, through the station, like a scream echoing through a valley. Garrus glanced over towards the source of the sound. Upon first inspection, it would seem to be a particularly rebellious officer refusing to come quietly. But he all too quickly recognized the voice and the spunk. It was that of young Zee, his faithful new ward being carted through the crowd, towards the back, along with the rest of the other uniformed miscreants, in a bellicose

fit. "LISTEN TO ME! I DIDN'T HAVE ANYTHING TO DO WITH THIS!"

"Heheheh..." Garrus chuckled under his breath, and shook his head. "I was wondering where he'd gotten off to." He uttered to himself, as he stepped away from the wall and maneuvered his way through the crowd, intent on interceding.

Within the quieter part of station, several affairs were already starting to unfold. While Shepard tried to explain the course of events of the past few weeks to Admiral Hackett, along with the existence of a man who's been dead for over a century, a black-haired report tried to make herself inconspicuous. She placed her bag down, and unzipped it, revealing an inert white camera drone, accented with a stylish red stripe. Checking to make sure she hadn't attracted any unwanted attention, she quickly snatched up a random datapad, and lingered around a nearby desk, pretending to work as some sort of secretary, while paying a prying ear to everything Shepard and Hackett were discussing.

Elsewhere, Jacob and Vanessa had managed to find a bit of peace and quiet in a cozy little corner, near a water cooler. The whole area was populated by dozens of desks, organized in a grid formation not unlike those seen in office buildings. But the desks themselves were practically deserted, save for a few lonely policemen working fervently and diligently. There was one in particular, seated at the front, at an important looking desk set apart from all the others. He was a grizzled old cop; a buzz-cut head of salt and pepper hair, a five-o'clock shadow framing his jaw, and a sour look on his face. He sat at his desk, issuing orders as the deluge of handcuffed malcontents were brought in, much in the same way that a traffic officer would direct cars back in the 20th century.

"Well, this is more like it." Jacob began, as he shrugged casually - trying to come off as coy. "Anyway, what I was trying to tell you is, I didn't wanna risk not seeing you again, before you left."

"Oh, no worries there, Mr. Taylor-" Vanasse replied, in a playfully seductive tone, as she shook her head. "I was NOT about to allow that to happen."

"Heh." Jacob laughed, beaming a grin from ear to ear. He must've been blushing, because he could feel heat radiating from his cheeks. "You know, you were pretty good back there." He said, as he looked her over, with admiration and a bit of lasciviousness "You really helped us out. I mean, you saved my skin, and I know you took Shepard by surprise. That's something that very few people can say they've done."

"Mmmâ€¦ Ecstatic to be of help, Mr. Taylor." Vanessa assured - crossing one arm, and wrapping a hand across her chin, as she reciprocated his gaze. "You know it's easy when you treat things like a business situation. In business, when you're met with a hostile takeover, you retaliate without quarter. Lure the circling vultures in, then show 'em that you're far from dead!"

"Heh. You're quite the woman. Business woman! I mean." He disclosed, before loudly and abruptly rectifying himself.

Vanessa smiled coquettishly. "I'm just glad to finally be out of that

messâ€| " She declared, in a creaky, strained voice, as she arched her back, and extended her arms for a relieving stretch. "Now. if I could only find a shower, and get some proper clothes onâ€| Not that I'm not grateful to you for saving my decency, of course. But eww-" She muttered in mild disgust, as she glanced down and spotted a crimson blotch on the coat's tan lapel - no doubt the blood belonging to one of the ruffians. "-Seems I owe you a sports coat." She regrettably disclosed.

"Nah." Jacob absolved. "Besides, you look a lot better in it than I ever did. Especially with that titillating little towel ensemble you're sporting, Ms. Masters." He said with a suggestive playfulness, as he held out his hands, and framed her in a square formed by his thumbs and index fingers.

"Trust me, darling. I look A LOT better with my hair washed, and fully dressed." She assured, as she tried to twirl a few strands of hair around between her fingers. But it was a knotted, frazzled mess, embellished with powdery white clumps of dried-in shampoo.

"I don't know, you look pretty good to me. Matter of fact, ahemâ€|" Jacob continued, as he cleared his throat, and rapped on his chest a couple of times with a closed fist, as if trying to work down some heartburn. "I was sort of thinkingâ€|" He began, shrugging nonchalantly and tilting his head. "Well, now that this whole thing is over, I was thinking maybe I could... give you a call sometime?"

"Oh, of course! Where are my manners?" Vanessa replied, shaking her head, with her hand drawn across her forehead. "Yes. You can find all of our contact information on SS-N's corporate extranet site. Just search keyword: 'Super Science Network.'" She concisely informed, with the apathetic guise of holovision commercial. "Leave us a message, and an authorized customer service representative will get back to you within one to two business days. Major holiday notwithstanding."

"Oh... Right, of courseâ€|" A crestfallen Jacob replied, as his melancholy eyes turned to the floor.

"But uhm... Why don't I give you the info to my own private line." She added, playful and flirtatious, as she brought up her omni-tool, and began to transmit. Jacob glanced back up - his subtly sly grin returning, as the hologram lit up on his arm, syncing her data to his omni. "You know - in case you want to contact me on moreâ€| personal affairs."

"Hey! Hey lady! It's me! Remember me!" Zee's grating, panicked voice suddenly interposed, trying to catch Vanessa's attention, as he was hauled into the rear of the station, towards Bailey's desk. As luck would unfortunately have it, however, his cries for attention seemed to fall on deaf ears. Jacob and Vanessa were completely enthralled by one another - lost in each other's eyes as some might say. "It's me! Zdrawkoh! Zudoku! Zimbabwe! Come on! You two know me! You know I wasn't with these guys! Tell 'em I'm not one of 'em!"

"Get back into line, scumbag!" A gritty C-Sec salarion officer ordered, as he shoved the wailing Zee back into conformity with the moving line of malcontents. "You're a disgrace to that uniform! You make me sick!"

"I keep telling you I wasn't in on this!" He asserted and pleaded all at once, as they walked through the station, towards a passageway labeled: TO DETENTION AREA.

Just then, his part of the line moved past the Captain's desk. By this point, Zee was a desperate state. "Captain Bailey!" He shouted out, as he practically threw himself onto the grizzled old officer's desk.

"Argh! What the hell is this?!" Bailey snarled in an irate fit - shooting to his feet, as his lamp and a stack of datapads were knocked to the floor. "Get him outta here!"

"No! Captain Bailey! You have to listen to me!" He pleaded in a fevered pitch, as two C-Sec officers rushed in, grabbed him by the shoulders, and hoisted him off the desk, back onto his feet. "I wasn't part of this! I had just started this job! I had nothing to do with this!"

"Sorry about that sir!" The salarian excused himself. "This one keeps insisting that he's innocent."

"Get 'em to holding!" Bailey commanded, with his finger pointed down into the dark, shadowy recesses of the detention area. "A tribunal can sort 'em out on Monday."

"I can't spend the weekend in jail!" Zee cried out, distraught, as the salarian and turian officers took hold of him, preparing to haul him off. "I've never even gotten a parking ticket!"

"Still the same ol' grouse I see, Bailey." A collected voice chimed in, with a snicker and a lighthearted sense of cynicism. "Book 'em now. Let a judge sort 'em out later."

Bailey shot back to an upright position, at the sound of the familiar voice, after bending over to retrieve his desk lamp.

"Mr. Vakarian!" Zee shouted out in jubilation, at the sight of his idol.

"Ah, it's you Garrus." Bailey greeted, with the makings of a smile on his sour face - extending his hand towards the turian, as the two men met. "I might've known you'd have a hand in thisâ€¦ As if my job wasn't hard enough already trying to coordinate the resituating of the Citadel, after the Reaper attack - you gotta come and dump a cruise ship full of a renegade security guards into my lap... Not that I'm not grateful, but if I didn't know any better, I'd say you were trying to work me into an early grave!"

"Ah, you're too stubborn to work yourself into an early grave, you cantankerous old varren. You'll outlive us all." Garrus humorously rebutted, as the two released hands. "But I'm here for the youngster, there." He ardently affirmed, as he pointed a finger towards Zee. "The kid's telling the truth, Bailey. He's not one of 'em."

"Well, that's all I need to hear." The grizzled old Captain assured, without question, as he turned to the two officers restraining the young guard, who was still donned in an Illustria Security Uniform. "Turn him loose."

Zee's mandibles fluttered with joy. Relief twinkled in his eyes, as his mouth stretched out into the turian equivalent of a smile. The salarian shrugged dubiously, as he removed the key from his belt and undid Zee's handcuffs. The silvery bracelets rattled and jingled as his wrists were suddenly unbound. Zee brought his liberated hands forward, wringing his chafed left wrist, with his right hand.

"Thanks." He begrudgingly offered up.

The salarian nodded, with indifference, as he continued to carry out his duty - hauling the rest of the miscreants into the holding cells.

"You might wanna get outta that uniform, kid." Garrus mockingly advised, with a subtle sense of truth buried in his words. "It's brought you nothing but trouble."

"Yeah, no kiddingâ€¦" Zee replied, sounding severely disillusioned, as he ripped the golden badge off his chest, and held it in the palm of his hand - examining the gleaming golden words emblazoned around an orange, white, and blue star: CARMENTA ILLUSTRIA SECURITY OFFICER. He sighed...

"So what do you think, Bailey?" Garrus questioned the Captain, as he nudged an elbow into his gut. "Got anything in the kid's size?"

"What? You mean like a spare set of clothes?"

"No, I mean like a C-Sec Uniform." Garrus elaborated, as he leaned against an empty desk adjacent to Bailey's. Zee's widened eyes shot up - glancing away from the tainted badge in his hand.

"From what Zdrawkoh here tells me, he's dreamt of being a C-Sec Investigator since he was five." Garrus continued on the youngster's behalf - Zee just nodded with a fervor, lacking the words to supplicate. "And he risked his own life to help us take these bastards down. I know he'd make a hell of an addition to the force, Bailey. He deserves his shot at the Academy."

"Hmmmâ€¦" Captain Armando Bailey muttered aloud, stroking his chin, as he sized the young officer up - scanning him from top to bottom. "You know son, this isn't just any old police force. We're Citadel Security - the finest law enforcers the galaxy has to offer. Thousands apply to the Academy each month. Only dozens get in, and out of those only the best of the best will ever be able to call themselves C-Sec Officers. You think you got what it takes?"

"I know I do sir!" Zee ecstatically assured, unconsciously clenching his hands into fists, and shaking them at his sides. "My whole life, the only thing I ever wanted to be was a cop! Just like the great Garrus Vakarian - the legend himself!" He proclaimed, as he turned to Garrus and gazed upon him with a fawning set of eyes.

"Well, you've definitely got the tenacity - I'll give you that." Bailey acknowledged, with a snicker. "I guess If they don't pound THAT out of you within your first day at the Academy, you might just make itâ€¦" Bailey shrugged, as he stepped forward, and extended an

arm across his desk, towards the young budding recruit.
"Congratulations son. You just joined C-Sec."

Zee exhaled a high pitched sound, that was part gasp and part squeal, as he reached for the hand, like he were reaching for the a life line. "Thank you sir! You've got no idea what this means to me!"

"Well, you can thank Garrus. If he sees potential in you, it's for good reason. I've got no doubts you'll be a credit to the force."

"Absolutely! Absolutely!" He said, nodding with a fervor, as he turned to Garrus. "And thank YOU, . I really appreciate this! I won't let you down."

"Don't mention it kid." Garrus bestowed - his arms akimbo on his hips. "I know you'll make me proud."

44. Chapter 44: Homecoming Part III

****Salvation: Episode I - The Taking of the Carmenta
Illustria****

Disclaimer: This fan-fiction is part of an episodic series taking place after Salvation: A Half-Life/Mass Effect Universe Fan Fiction, which will lead directly to its sequel, Salvation II: Project Prometheus. These episodes and sequel take place OUTSIDE of the Mass Effect 3 continuity. Characters property of their respective companies, Half-Life created by Valve and Mass Effect created by Bioware.

****Chapter 44: Homecoming Part III****

****Aan'Serai****

"So let me get this straight!" Admiral Stephen Hackett dubiously put forth, with his hands held out in front of him, as if trying to grasp and intangible box. "You're telling me! That Gordon Freeman was never killed by the Combine." He said, as he glanced back and forth between Shepard and the purported physicists. "That he was put into some sort of stasis! By Cerberus!" He exclaimed, with eyes peeled in disbelief, and his hands fluttering about. "And that you woke him up, to help you fight the Reapers! And WHEN he woke up... through some sort of telepathic link that he got almost 200 years ago! he managed to make contact with the Vortigaunts! and that's how you found out about their Anti-Reaper weapon. Does that about sum it up?"

John sighed. "Yes sir!" He unenthusiastically put forth. "That's more or less the gist of it!"

Gordon rolled his eyes, as he looked away and gave a subtle shake of his head. Had he not lived it himself, he never would've believed it either.

"Well. In that case..." Hackett began, as he took a couple of steps back towards Gordon. "Might I say it is a most esteemed honor-" He said, as he laid a gentle hand upon the weary physicists shoulder,

coaxing him to turn back and face the Admiral. "-to meet the savior of the humanityâ€¦| The One Free Man himself."

Gordon's eyes bulged with surprise. "Youâ€¦| Believe me?!" He beckoned, perplexed.

"If there's one thing I've learned not to do son, it's to second guess this man." The Admiral assured, as he pointed a hand towards Shepard. "And if he says you're Gordon Freeman in the flesh, then by god you must be The Opener of the Way, himself."

"Hehâ€¦|" Hackett tittered a bit, under his breath, as he took a step back from the two men, standing side by side. "Well how 'bout that. The Savior of Humanity." He announced, with a hand pointed towards Gordon. "And the Savior of the Citadel." As his second hand pointed towards Shepard. "Together - saviors of the Galaxy."

"Thank you, sir." The Commander acknowledged, as he gave Gordon a quick pat on the back.

"Yes, thank you." Gordon softly supplemented.

"Matty, come back here!" A panicked shriek suddenly pierced the men's ears, as a bit of commotion was stirring up at the entrance. A spirited, brown-haired little boy shoved his way past the police barricade, nimbly slipping right through their legs as he darted towards Shepard and Tali. His parents were not far behind; trying to push their through the guarding officers, in a frenzy.

"Let us through, that's our son, damn it!" "We can't lose him again!" The boy's mother and father pleaded frantically, as they were restrained.

"Tali! Tali! Mr. John!" Matty exclaimed with the overjoyed, uninhibited elation that only a child could muster. He ran straight up to the small conglomeration, right into Shepard's waiting arms.

"Heh-hey, trooper!" John said with a surprised laugh, as he scooped the boy up, groaning a little from the strain to lift him. "What are you doing here?"

"Kresha!" Tali exclaimed, as she leaned in to embrace the boy, while he sat on Shepard's arm. "Oh, I'm so happy you're safe!"

"Hi Tali!" Matty blithely greeted, reciprocating the hug. "I wanted to come find you! I saw how Mr. John beat the bad policemen! But the other policemen didn't wanna let us come over here."

John glanced up to see a worried man and woman trying, with little success, to get through the line of police separating the main station from the back. "It's alright, officer!" He shouted over to them, with an exuberant Matty still perched on his arm. "You can let them through. They're his parents."

The two officers standing guard at the entrance shared a glance, before simply stepping to one side. Alex and Angela flew in, as if they were fleeing a burning room, towards their little boy. Behind them, a young, ambitious blonde tried to slip through the momentary crack. But, unsurprisingly, her attempt was quickly

suppressed.

"Well now, who's this young lad, Commander?" The Admiral cheerfully questioned, as he stepped towards John, Tali, and the boy.

"Admiral, this is Matthew Farrell." John introduced. "He's been our brave little companion throughout this whole ordeal."

"I'm a niance cadet!" The boy merrily added.

"Matty!" Angela exclaimed, as she and Alex rushed up to the group, coaxing John to turn and face them. Angela stopped upon reaching them - placing a hand across her chest, and hunkering down, as she panted and heaved from both relief and fatigue. "Don't you ever run off like that again! That's how we lost you in the first place!"

"I'm terribly sorry about this, Commander Shepard." Alex supplemented, trying to excuse himself and his son, with a grateful yet embarrassed look on his face. "The instant he caught sight of you he ripped his hand away from mine, and just bolted over. He's not usually so impulsive!"

"It's quite alright, Mr. Farrell" John readily exonerated, as he bounced Matty on his arm a bit. "Your son's a very brave little boy. He's a real trooper. You should be very proud." He proclaimed, speaking to the both of them.

"Oh, believe me, we are!" Angela affirmed, with tears of joy welling in her eyes.

"And we can't thank you enough! Any of you!" Alex added, in a voice that was muffled by the knot that had wedged itself in his throat, as he looked back and forth between Shepard, Tali, Gordon, and Miranda. "Thank you for saving our little boy."

"No thanks are necessary."

"Somehow I knew you'd say that." Hackett's voice replied to Shepard's kind words, forcing him to turn back around. "I'll go ahead and take my leave now, Commander. Got fires to put out, elsewhere."

"Of course, sir."

"And as for you, little Cadet-" The Admiral said, as his eyes turned to the bright-faced youngster. "-You're a little young now, but the Alliance is always looking for brave, dependable, recruits. You might just have yourself a bright future in the Alliance Navy one day. Now! Salute!" He ordained, as he raised a flattened hand up to his brow, compelling Matty to emulate the action as best he could. Hackett grinned. "At ease."

"Atta boy!" Shepard said with a chuckle, as he bounced Matty up, in his arms. "Now! Let's hear you give the Admiral an Alliance Marine 'hoo-rah'! Ready?"

"Uh-huh!"

"HOO-RAH!" They both exclaimed, pumping their fists out in front of them.

"Heheheh, that's my trooper!"

"Hmhmhm, he's got future N7 written all over him." Hackett declared, with a chuckle. "Oh and one other thing, before I go, Commander. I ordered you to take a one week liberty pass. And by god, I expect you to fulfill that order. Because in a week, I want you back in your navy blues, ready to resume your duties for the good of the galaxy."

"Yes sir!" Shepard adamantly acknowledged, as he stood at attention, and saluted.

"Yes sir!" Matty chimed in, as he did the same, flashing a flaccid, giddy-faced salute.

The Admiral smiled as he spun around and made for the nearest exit. Before leaving however, he turned partially back around, and looked over the bruised, battered, and bloody state Shepard and his team were in. "Hmm! Better make it two weeks!" He said, in closing, as he finally turned and walked away.

"I'm sorry, Commander." Angela interjected, as she moved in. "You look wounded, and I'm sure you're utterly exhausted. I should take him off your hands." She said as she lifted Matty up and out of his arms.

"Tali!" Matty began, as he wrapped his arms around his mother's neck and shoulders. "Since I'm a niance cadet now, does that mean I get to come with you and Mr. John to fight other bad people?"

The lot of them laughed at his naive, albeit noble, eagerness.

"No, kresha!" Tali said, still tittering under her breath, as she lightly rubbed his back, and brushed the hair out of his eyes. "I'm afraid you can't come with us. You're a little too young for that, but! We'll figure out some way you can come visit us. If it's okay with your parents."

Young Matthew had nothing more to say. His actions spoke volumes, as he simply stretched his arms and his body towards Tali, embracing her as tightly as his developing little limbs would allow, with warmth, tenderness, and affection.

"Oh!" She uttered, under her breath, as she squeezed him back.

Angela turned and looked at her husband. She greeted him with a blissful smile, knowing that their child was in such good hands - it was a smile that he quickly reciprocated. After a long embrace, she felt Matty slowly pull away.

"Come on, sweetie." She said, taking a firmer hold on him, as he hooked his arms back around her. "You must be starving. Let's go see if we can't find you a juice box and some apple slices."

"Okay mama!" Matty submitted, as he started rubbing his drowsy eyes with his curled up fingers. Angela's smile never dimmed as she ran her hand softly up and down his back. She looked back up at her child's saviors, excusing herself from their presence with a humble nod, as she turned and headed back towards the main part of the

station.

"Bye Tali! Bye Mr. John!" Young Farrell called out, as he waved back at the couple, over his mother's shoulder. "Thank you for saving me from the bad policemen! I love you!"

"So long, trooper!"

"Bye-bye Matty!" Tali said, with a heavy hint of despondence weighing down her voice, as the two waved back.

"Oooh." Tali grieved, as she took a hold of Shepard's arm and leaned against him, longingly. "John, I want one!"

"Ah-hem." Shepard felt a jab in his opposite side, as he heard Gordon clear his throat. He glanced over towards Gordon, who in turn motioned downwards, with a batting of his eyes. John glanced down to see Gordon fish a sparkling, golden band out of his pocket, and present it to him.

Shepard's jaw dropped and his eyes peeled open in amazement, as he took the flawless, tanzanite engagement ring between his fingers.

"How did you-?" He began to ask, in a whisper, before simply trailing off. Gordon shrugged, as he motioned at Shepard with his head, as if to say "Go on, then."

"Uh, listen Commanderâ€¦!" Alex interceded again, having stayed behind after Angela retired with Matty. "I know I can never repay what you've done for me and my familyâ€¦ But I wanted to ask if there's any way I can at least start? I-I don't know. Would it insult you if I offered you a cash reward? If there's anything - anything at all I can ever give you, or do for you, by all means, you have it."

"Mr. Farrell." Shepard began, putting his right hand up, as he palmed the ring in the clenched fist of his left. "I already told you. No thanks are necessary. We're just glad to have averted tragedy."

"I know, I know that, Commander!" Alex staunchly asserted, as he shook his head, and pounded a fist into his open palm. "But darn it, you deserve something! I mean, look at the lot of you!" He said, as he observed the battered state of the two couples. "You've been through so much to save people like us. No good deed should go unrewarded. Especially for the saviors of-" Just then, Alex stopped dead, mid-sentence. His eyes and his mouth opened wide with an epiphany. "That's it!" He exclaimed. "That's what I can do for you! I can tell the galaxy your story! See you get the recognition you deserve!"

"Our storyâ€¦!?" Shepard beckoned, with an eyebrow raised.

"Yes!" Alex affirmed. "See, I'm AlexÃ¶nd Farrell - I produce the biggest movies to come out of Illium. I'm the one that produced 'Repurposed', 'Project Vanguard', 'Those Left Behind', 'The Reign of Unicron', and of course the 'Blasto' series! I can see to it that the galaxy knows the true story of the people that saved them!"

"...That's very generous of you, Mr. Farrell." Shepard reluctantly

offered up, with an awkward look on his face. "But we're gonna have to pass. Besides, we're not actors."

"Actors, pishaw!" Alex jovially scoffed, with a wave of his hand. "Galaxy's full of actors. Who needs 'em? Bunch of bratty, overpaid, egotists! I'm not talking about turning you into actorsâ€¦ I'm talking about letting me tell the galaxy your life stories!" He exclaimed, brimming with excitement, as he clenched and shook his fists together in front of him, as if he'd just clutched two handfuls of gold. "Your grand crusade to save our world - every world - from the Reapers! All straight from your lips! It'll be huge! I'm talkin' movies, HV shows, comics, saturday morning cartoons, action figures! I can see it nowâ€¦" He announced, as he squeezed himself between John and Gordon. His eyes lit up with eagerness as he looked up towards the ceiling, framing an invisible picture with his hands. "We'll call it Salvation: The Team Normandy Saga... Ehâ€¦" His eager expression melted into instant disapproval, as he sneered, and shook his head. "Nah, that's crap. But it's okay, we can work on that!"

John glanced over, watching both Tali and Miranda detach themselves and begin to gravitate away, with a rapid loss of interest. He twiddled the engagement ring around in his fingers a bit.

"Sounds great!" He unexpectedly exclaimed, as he patted Alex on the back, and stepped forward, away from him and Gordon. "Tell you what! Why don't I leave you with my good friend, Gordon hereâ€¦ You two can iron out the details!"

"What?! Me?! But, I don'tâ€¦"

"Yeah, Gordon." Shepard acceded, cutting Freeman off, with a slick look in his eyes. "I got a pressing engagement to get to. If you know what I mean."

"Ohâ€¦!" A smile came over Gordon's face as he suddenly understood. "Uh, okay, I guess..."

"Great. Now if you two will excuse meâ€¦" He said, as he turned and walked away; engagement ring in hand.

"Alrighty then, Gordo." Alex began to pitch, as he drew his arm around the battered physicists shoulders. "Can I call you Gordo?"

"...Well, actually."

"Super! Now, walk with me. Talk with me!" He enthused, as he began to lead a fidgety Gordon in a leisurely stroll around the station. "Here's what I'm thinking, first and foremost. One wordâ€¦ Documentary! Let people get to know the REAL Team Normandy from Team Normandy themselves, know what I mean?"

"I suppose, butâ€¦"

"Once we get all of you established and recognizable, the doors are going to fly open for all of you, my friend! You'll be huge! I'm talkin' movies, HV shows, talk show appearances!"

"Uhmâ€¦ Talk show appearances?!"

"Yeah, of course!" Alex nodded, with an exuberant glee glinting in his eyes. "Once I make some calls, get some of my PR people to work, you'll be huge, trust me! You'll be bigger than Blasto! Here-" He offered, as he pulled a long, brown, stogie from his shirt pocket, and handed it to Gordon. "-interest you in a cigar?"

"Uhm, I really don't smokeâ€¦" Gordon tactfully disclosed, in spite of having already taken the cigar between his fingers, purely on reaction.

"So give it to someone who does." Alex advised, with an indifferent shrug, and a smile. "Consider it a gift of good faith, and a commemoration on our new business partnership!"

Gordon examined the cigar pinched between his fingertips. His face suddenly went pale, as the thought of appearing on stage, on camera, and in front of thousands of people was suddenly more terrifying than any Combine or Reaper force he'd ever facedâ€¦ He gulped.

"Tali, can I talk to you for a moment?" John beckoned, with a heavy hint of stress resonating in his voice, as he approached her from behind.

"Of course, John." Tali assured, as she glanced over at him. He was sweating, and noticeably agitated all of a sudden. "What's wrong? Are you alright? Should I get a medic?!"

"No, I'm fine Tali. I just-" Shepard gulped back the rest of his sentence, as he looked around. The loud clamor from the crowd on the opposite side of the station drilled in his ears like a jackhammer. Everywhere he looked there was some sort of commotion or hysteria going on. Phones and omni-tools ringing, C-Sec officers and emergency response personnel dashing back and forth, members of the rogue Illustria team being dragged away in handcuffs - there was not a snippet of privacy in sight. And privacy was the only thing he yearned for right now. As his gaze panned across the room, past Gordon chatting with Alex Farrell, past the enchanted liaison going on between Vanessa and Jacob, and past the conversation of two old C-Sec officers about a potential new one, John spotted a wide opened door leading to an invitingly empty and delightfully quiet room.

"Come on." He urged, taking her by the hand, as he led her towards the opened doorway. "Let's see if we can't find something a bit more peaceful."

Tali gladly followed him in, wondering what it was that was on his mind. The last time she'd seen him this clammy and restless was just before the ship got hijacked. And come to think of it, that was the only time she'd seen him like this.

As the two passed through the entrance, into the serene room, John activated the door's holographic switch, forcing it to slide shut behind them. Just as the thick metal door sealed itself, a green light just above it came on outside, which read: INTERROGATION ROOM (A) NOW IN USE. A bright flash of white light lit up the barren wall beside the door, as two mounted parallel bars suddenly sprang to life, projecting a large, holographic screen, which broadcasted the happenings within the room, like a two-way mirror.

"Ah, that's betterâ€¦ A little peace and quiet, at last." John expressed, with a nervous jitter, as the two entered the eerily silent room.

It was a room that had seen and heard many things, but it didn't have much to tell. A solid steel table sat in the middle of the bland, desolate chamber, with two plain aluminum chairs on each side. The walls were made of unpainted stainless steel, and their luster had long since faded. They actually showed signs of rust and oxidation at the corners and edges. There was a musty scent in the air, and the white fluorescent lights hanging from the ceiling were much more intense than necessary.

The Commander sighed as he took a brief, cursory glance around the nondescript room. "Taliâ€¦ I'm so sorry." He apologized, shaking his head as he let it hang down over his chest. "None of this turned out how I planned."

"That's hardly your fault, John." Tali graciously acknowledged, bringing a hand up to caress his cheek. "None of us could've expected this."

"I know." He despondently admitted, as he looked back up at her. "But I'd planned this so well!" He exclaimed, shaking his head with a blend of anger, frustration, and regret. "It was going to be absolutely perfect. Instead, look at where I'm doing thisâ€¦" John spread his arms, angrily shrugging when he spoke, as he looked around the walls and ceiling. "In a dank, smelly old interrogation room, in the middle of a Police Stationâ€¦"

"Doing what...?!" Tali beckoned, perplexed. "John, I-I don't understandâ€¦"

"Taliâ€¦" The Commander started up again, before abruptly stopping himself, with a gulp. But he forced himself to continue. "Tali, the reason I got so angry back there, after you took out the YMIR is-" He paused again. His eyes sank in reflection, before coming back up and finding hers shining out from behind the mask, willing him on. "-It's because for a moment, I thought I might lose you. I saw myself losing what I could never bear to loseâ€¦ I can't see a life without you in it Taliâ€¦"

Tali's luminous eyes flickered a bit. "And I can't see my life without you, John."

Shepard smiled. "It's funny." He said, with a nervous titter. "For a while, I figured the phrase 'the rest of your life' didn't apply to me anymore. Or to any of us, reallyâ€¦" He admitted with a dumbfounded shrug. "I don't think any of us ever really thought we'd live to see the day when the Reapers were no more. We all 'knew', going into the Omega-4 Relay, that it was a suicide mission. We all 'knew' that if we were going to die, we were going to die fighting the Reapers. But look at usâ€¦!" He exuberantly exclaimed, as he reached out and took both Tali's hands with both of his. "We're still here! And we've got a 'rest of our lives' again!"

The quarian before him smiled under her mask. She was confused and bewildered, but happyâ€¦ She couldn't fathom what was happening, but she'd never seen Shepard like this before. She knew something was

coming, and it was going to be monumental.

"Taliâ€¦" John softly started again, soft and sincere, as he caressed the backs of her hands with his thumbs. "I'm ready to be happyâ€¦ To make you happyâ€¦ I'm ready to have the rest of my life. And I wanna spend it with you - If you'll let me. Basically, what I'm asking is-" He said, as he pulled a stunning Tanzanite diamond on a gleaming silvery band out from his pocket. "Tali'Zorah Vas Normandy Nar Rayyaâ€¦" As he slid the ring onto her finger. "Will you marry meâ€¦?"

Tali retracted her hand, now happily burdened with the encumbrance of a flawless engagement ring - a whirlpool of white diamonds and Tanzanite, in the midst of the solid Platinum Milky Way. A perfect fit. Her fingers trembled a bit, partly from shock and partly from disbelief, as the refracted rays from the diamonds lit up her faceplate, like the beams from a disco ball.

"Keelahâ€¦" Tali uttered, breathless and stunned. She looked back at John who stood patiently waiting for an answer, with a look in his eyes akin to a man in a hospital, waiting to hear saving or damning news about an infirm loved one.

"...Marry you?" Tali asked, somewhat confused. "Do you meanâ€¦ Aan'Serai? The Life Bond Eternal?!"

"If that means that I get to spend my life with the most wonderful, beautiful quarian in the galaxy, then yesâ€¦ Would youâ€¦ Aan'Serai with me?"

Tali's hands shot up to her mouthpiece, covering it as if she were trying to prevent the air from escaping, as she sputtered, giggled, and gasped for air under her mask, all at once.

"YES!" She emphatically erupted, as she threw her hands out, flailing them about with glee. "Yes! Yes, of course I will John! Of course!"

"Yes!" Shepard exclaimed in triumph, as the two flew towards each other, engaging in a passionate embrace. At that moment, it was as if the room itself trembled, and a low rumble seemed to emanate from outside, muffled by the thick metal walls. "Hahaha!" John laughed tumultuously, squeezing Tali tightly, as they swayed back and forth, brimming and shaking with excitement.

"We'll - We'll have a huge wedding!" He continued, as the two separated, though keeping each other's hands held. "We'll have flowers, caterers! All that stuff! I-I don't know much about planning a wedding, but we'll get anything you want! I'll reserve the entire Presidium if I have to!" He erupted into an ecstatic fusillade, before suddenly stopping into contemplation. "Wow, we need to find a wedding planner, don't we?" He chuckled.

"In time." Tali acknowledged with a blithe snuffle, softly weeping tears of joy beneath her mask. "All that matters right now is thatâ€¦ Even with the dawning sun, we will never part our separate ways. And I will hold this night in memory for all my living days."

John smiled, as he caressed her gloved hands.

"You remember that line, don't you?" She asked, causing him to raise a mildly perplexed eyebrow. "From the end of Fleet and Flotilla, with Shalei and Bellicusâ€¦ I never dreamed I could have such a precious romance in my own life. Let alone something WAY better." She giggled.

"I don't think I've ever seen that, uh, vidâ€¦" He said dubiously.

"What?! You've never- How could you not have?!" Tali replied, taken aback, as Shepard simply batted his eyes around and shrugged a bit. "Wellâ€¦ I know what movie we're watching next!" She exclaimed as she aligned herself with him, and the two made for the door.

"Heh, anything you want, my loveâ€¦" John replied, with a laugh and a playful shake of his head, as he wrapped his arm around her. "Soâ€¦ How do you think we should announce the news to the others?" He asked.

"I don't know." Tali began to reply, as John reached for the door's green holopanel. "Maybe we should wait a while before telling them. Everyone's been through so much toda-"

The door slid open, and like a shockwave surging from an amplifier, the two were suddenly greeted by an unchecked uproar of joyful cheers and applause! It was a gallery of happy faces - their friends and squadmates waiting there to meet them with kudos and congratulations.

"...What's going on?!" John beckoned, unable to contain his own laughter, as he was lauded with pats on his back, and people reaching to shake his hand.

"What do you mean, 'what's going on'?" Garrus replied, as he stepped forward. "You're getting married! Congratulations!" He felicitated, as he wrapped his arm around both Tali and Shepard, in a congratulatory hug.

"You could hear us?!" Tali asked, when he pulled away, with a cheery grin beaming on his face.

"Hear you?! We saw everything!" The turian declared, as he pointed a hand to the neighboring wall, directing the two's attention to the lit-up live video feed from the inside of the interrogation room. "It was better than holomax. I was on the edge of my seat. Or I would've been, if I actually had one, hehe."

"Err, sorry Commander." Bailey's gruff, grizzled voice interjected, as he wriggled his way through the crowd huddled around the newly engaged couple. "You stepped into an active interrogation room. If you wanted some privacy, you should've asked me. I woulda let you use my office."

"Eheh, it'sâ€¦ It's alright, Captain." Shepard acceded - powerless to do anything else at this point, though not really mindful. "No harm done."

"Tali!" A shrill voice suddenly screamed, as the brown-haired girl from engineering, Gabby Daniels, plowed her way to the front of the crowd, with an elated exuberance in her eyes. "Oh my god, YOU'RE

GETTING MARRIED!" She screamed at the top of her lungs, with her hands flailing and thrashing by her face, as if she was trying to fan herself for oxygen.

"I KNOW!" Tali retorted, with a congruent sense of glee.

They both suddenly exploded into a frenzy of happy squeals and shrieks, as the two locked hands and began bouncing up and down like a pair of giddy school girls with a high school crush.

"Tali, that's amazing!" Gabby continued, as the gleeful exhibition eventually slowed, even though her ear-to-ear grin never subsided. "I'm so happy for you!"

"Thank you, Gabby."

"Ahemâ€¦. Congratulations Tali. Shepard." An uneasy, and somewhat deadpan, feminine voice dubiously offered up, just then, as Miranda stepped in towards the couple. "I'm sure the two of you will be very happy together. And I wish you all the luck in the galaxy." She offered in respect; clearly not one for emotional displays of joviality.

"Oh, well thank you, Miranda." Tali accepted with a humble nod. "That means alot coming from you."

Miranda returned the nod, supplemented with a subtle smile, as she turned to Shepard. "And Shepard... I know the circumstances weren't ideal-" She continued, with a timbre of playful sarcasm in her voice. "-but you could've at least gone down on one knee."

"Oiâ€¦" The Commander sighed, groaned, and laughed all at once - clenching his eyes and pinching the bridge of his nose in feigned aggravation, as he recalled the fiasco that his initial bended-knee proposal attempt stirred up.

Just then, Tali took a step forward, as an awkward silence fell upon the group. She brushed a side of her veil back and fidgeted with her fingers, as she searched for an appropriate set of words.

"...Listen, Miranda." She hesitantly began, with an indifferent shrug. "I know we've never really been friends. Or even acquaintancesâ€¦ I think a lot of times, we've barely even considered each other teammatesâ€¦"

Miranda sighed, rolled her eyes, and crossed her arms, as she quickly inferred where this was going. Obviously she wouldn't be invited to the wedding.

"But-" The quarian continued - the eagerness in her voice slowly reemerging. "-I was wondering if you'd like to help me and John plan the wedding."

"Plâ€¦ Plan the weddingâ€¦?!" The human operative implored, wide-eyed and completely taken aback. "You mean you want MY help?!" She asked, as she pointed a finger into her own chest.

Tali's only response was a slow, accepting nod.

"Butâ€¦ I don't know anything about planning a weddingâ€¦"

"Well, neither do I." Tali shrugged. "But I've never met anyone with your organizational skills, or attention to detail."

"...Really?" Miranda asked again, with a furrowed brow, as if she wasn't sure she'd heard right.

"Yes reallyâ€¦!" Tali laughingly replied.

"...Well. I suppose I could try and offer up a subtle opinion here and there." Miranda conjectured, with an indecisive shrug. "Have you thought about where you want to have it...? Ooh!" She suddenly exclaimed, on the brink of a brainstorm, with a burst of enthusiasm in her voice. "What about an outdoor wedding? A garden wedding, perhaps!"

"John mentioned a wedding on the Presidium!" Tali declared, with matching excitement.

"Or a beach wedding!" Gabby chimed in - the three ladies now huddling into an animate bundle.

"OOH!" Miranda suddenly gasped - a wide, opened mouth grin grew on her face, as her eyes peeled open, brimming with zeal. "You could have it on Rannoch! The first quarian to be married on the homeworld in over 300 years!"

"That would be AMAZING, Tali!" Daniels gleefully assured, as the huddled nest of women suddenly gravitated away, moving as one as they completely lost themselves in their deliriously overjoyed conversation. "You've so got to let me help you pick out your dress!"

"Heheheh!" A hearty chuckle rang in Shepard's ear, as Jacob approached his side, and wrapped an arm around his neck and shoulders. "So long to the bachelor life, eh Shepard?"

"Glad to see it go, Jacobâ€¦" John blithely admitted, lost in something of a euphoric state, as he watched his girl walk away with a level of happiness he'd never seen before.

"And what about your bachelor status, huh?" He quickly inquired, as he turned back to Jacob, surprised to not find the lilac-eyed firecracker by his side. "Where's that quote-unquote 'friend' of yours that tried to twist my arm off?"

"Aw come on, don't exaggerate, Shepard. She was just eager to help!" Jacob laughingly exonerated, with a jab of his elbow. "And she had to run. Desperate to get into a shower and a designer outfit, without getting into a hostage situation apparently."

"Uh-huhâ€¦ She's a feisty one, isn't she?"

"Wouldn't be interested if she wasn't." Jacob smirked. "Bachelor status still pending, butâ€¦" He nodded and shrugged. "The situation looks promising. We'll see what happens."

Shepard snickered under his breath, as he bowed and shook his head.

"Congratulations, Shepard." Mordin's voice was the next to chime in, as the salarian's face suddenly emerged from the crowd, along with Grunt, Joker, and a high-beam headlamp from Legion. "Glad to see life goes on. You and Tali, good fit. Hardly viable for reproductive purposes, but hear infant adoption is popular human custom."

"Heh, thanks Mordin."

"Yeah, Mordin's got a point!" Grunt, the bellicose young krogan, weighed in, with a huff. "Isn't the whole reason for these mating ceremonies so you can choose the most fertile female that will spawn the most offspring for you?"

"...Not exactly, Grunt." The Commander ambiguously retorted, with an uneasy shrug. "Not for humans and quarians, anywayâ€|"

"Hmph." The krogan scoffed, as he crossed his arms. "Well, Tali's one quarian I don't hate, so she's got that going for her, I guess. Good luck, I suppose."

"Gee, thanks Grunt..."

"Shepard, Commander." Legion's monotonous voice was the next to interject in the litany of praise. "We felicitate the Shepard, Commander on his verbal contract of binding. We have scanned our database on human matrimony practices, and shall obtain a number of common household appliances to bequeath onto Shepard, Commander upon the date of his unification ritual, as is customary in human culture."

"Legion - you're the only appliance I'll ever need." He said, with an overjoyed chuckle brewing under his breath. "So long as I can program you for basic housework, heheh."

Legion's only response was the subtle, though clearly befuddled movements of the mechanical flaps on his head, as his optic aperture shuttled back and forth.

"Congrats, John." Gordon's low voice eventually bestowed, as he stepped forward, fishing something out of his shirt pocket. "I'm real happy for you and Miss Tali. Care for a celebratory cigar?" He offered, as he extended the stogie to Shepard.

"Where'd you get-" The Commander laughed, and began to ask, before simply shrugging. He gratefully accepted, taking the Cigar from Gordon, and pinching it between his teeth. He reached out, and wrapped his arm around Gordon's neck and shoulders, pulling him to his side.

"Hey Bailey!" Shepard called out to the Captain, who was still nearby, though having turned his attention to a datapad. But it was quickly turned back up to the calling Commander. "Do me a favor, would you? Get a picture of me with my guys, here!"

45. Chapter 45: Homecoming Part IV

****Salvation: Episode I - The Taking of the Carmenta
Illustria**Disclaimer: This fan-fiction is part of an episodic series**

taking place after Salvation: A Half-Life/Mass Effect Universe Fan Fiction, which will lead directly to its sequel, Salvation II: Project Prometheus. These episodes and sequel take place OUTSIDE of the Mass Effect 3 continuity. Characters property of their respective companies, Half-Life created by Valve and Mass Effect created by Bioware.

****Chapter 45: Homecoming Part IV****

****Paparazzi****

As the male members of the Normandy Team shuffled around, quickly trying to form some semblance of an orderly row for the impromptu photo, a lone, blond-haired reporter continued to pace about, right on the other side of the cordoned off station, like a caged animal.

"Lady, don't you wanna go homeâ€|?" The turian officer blocking her path questioned, with a mounting sense of bother in his voice. "The sooner you get yourself processed with one of the other officers, and get your name check off of the passenger manifest, you can leave, and put this whole nightmare behind you!"

Cameron's restless, nervy pace was stopped cold, as she turned her attention back to the turian.

"What's your name, Officer?" She demanded.

"For spirit's sakes, lady. Would you just-"

"I asked your name!"

The turian sighed, and rolled his eyes after being cut off. "Telyon." He begrudgingly disclosed. "Telyon Albaston."

"Well then, Officer Albaston." Cameron began again, through her tightly clenched teeth. She looked as though she was about to turn feral. Her left eye twitched with exasperation, as she pressed the fingertips of both her hands together tightly, forming a pyramid before her. "I hope that you'll remember this day, because this IS the day that my nightmare ended. But yours is just beginning!" She declared, with a sinister sense of glee in her voice, and a demented look in her eyes. "It just so happens that I am a very close, personal friend of Commander Shepard. Oh yeahâ€| We go way back!" She affirmed. "But I don't expect you to believe me. I'll see him again, soon enough. And when I do, and he asks me why I was nowhere in sight to congratulate him on his big engagement - at least, I can only assume by the loud cheers of congratulations, that it was his engagement-" She coyly shrugged. "-I'll be sure to tell him that I was stonewalled by a C-Sec officer named Telyon Albaston who flat out refused to let me in!"

A look of severe unease came over the turian's face, despite his best efforts maintain an inscrutable expression. He tugged at his shirt collar, as it felt unusually warm all of a sudden.

"Oh, And then!" Cameron continued - a demented sense of cynicism ringing in her voice, as she clasped her hands together with a clap, that shuddered the turian with it's sound. "When he asks me why Khalisah al-Jilani, a reporter he CLEARLY HATES, which is painfully

obvious from every interview he's ever had with her, was allowed in. Again, I'll be sure to drop your name!" She assured, waving a finger at him, as a grin stretched from ear to ear across her face. "I'll say, 'Oh, gee Shepard! You remember Telyon Albaston? That cop I was just telling you about?'" She mocked. "'The one that wouldn't let me in? Yeah, turns out he's crooked as well. He takes bribes to look the other way.'" I'm sure that'll sit well with him, you know him being a Spectre and the 'Paragon of Humanity' and the 'Reaper Slayer' and all that." She stated, casually shrugging off the notion. "It's not like he's gonna come for your job, or you'll be lucky if you can find work flipping burgers at a 'Hungry Elcor' or anything like thatâ€¦ You'll be fine."

"Anywayâ€¦" She continued - her voice muffled by the sound of an escaping yawn, as she turned away, appearing to lose interest. "I'm pooped. If Shepard asks, and I'm sure he will, tell him I went homeâ€¦"

"Err, ehm, wait!" The turian stammered, as Cameron started to walk away. She stopped, with her back still towards him, as a cockeyed grin overtook her expression.

"...I didn't realize you and Shepard were such good friends." Telyon excused himself, with a false enthusiasm. "Yâ€¦ You can go on through." He reluctantly admitted.

Cameron spun around, on the balls of her feet, like a ballerina - her smile shining like never before.

"Why, thank you officer Albaston!" She graciously acknowledged, as she breezed back towards the two sentries. "I'll be sure to mention the diligence and dedication of our hard working C-Sec Officers to him!" She proclaimed, tongue and cheek, as she squeezed between them, and rushed inward.

"Ughâ€¦" Telyon heaved and groaned, as he hung his head down, and shook it. After a moment of self loathing, he raised it back up, and glanced over at his salarian partner who, in turn, was burning a hole right through him with a judgemental stare.

"What?!" Telyon barked.

"You know we're supposed to be keeping people OUT, right?!" The salarian sarcastically chided.

Telyon's mandibles fluttered a bit, as his eyes bounced around. He turned back, straight ahead, and mustered the only response he could think of. "Shut up."

The salarian shook his head damningly, as he too turned back towards the front. "We are so firedâ€¦"

A brilliant flash of light washed over the grinning men of the Normandy crew - painting them in white luminance, and immortalizing their poses in Bailey's omni-tool as he snapped their photo.

"Alright, one more." Bailey instructed, with his hologram-covered forearm held up, as he tried to frame the the team perfectly in his omni-tool's viewfinder screen. "Hold it there."

The men stood side by side, cascading from left to right, in order; At the far left was Mordin, with his arm outstretched behind Joker, who in turn had his arm at Jacobs back, and so on, with his arm behind Gordon. Shepard stood beside him, at the center of the vignette with both arms outstretched - one around Gordon, and the other around Garrus. Continuing on from the turian was their silvery, mechanical ally Legion, and lastly the bellicose but brutally loyal krogan, Grunt.

"Okay, say 'Normandy'."

"NORMANDY!" They all bellowed, with toothy grins, as the white flash announced the capture.

"I want a copy sent right to my omni-tool, Bailey!" Garrus jokingly ordered, as the uniformity of the group began to dissolve almost immediately.

"Anyway, as I was saying, Shepard." Joker began, seamlessly continuing from a conversation he'd started moments ago. "Everybody knows weddings are just to appease the women. But now bachelor parties - that's the real reason MEN get married. And you've got to let me be the one to plan it for you!" The Helmsman eagerly enthused. "I guarantee you a night where you'll be smashed beyond any retainable memory, and yet a night that is so mind-blowingly awesome, you'll be able never forget it!" He exclaimed.

"It think it's a little early to be planning the bachelor party, Joker." John modestly suggested, with a happy shrug. "But I'll keep you in mind."

"Alright, I'm just sayin' is all." Joker griped, with a bit of disappointment in his voice. "Anyway, grats again." He offered with a pat to the Commander's back, before beginning to hobble away. "Now who can I talk to around here about getting a ride back to Lycuna? My baby's parked in a cold hangar somewhere, and she's missing me, I can feel it!"

The crowd gathered around Commander Shepard gradually dispersed - all going about their own individual business, as the initial excitement began to abate - though the sensation of auspice hung in the air.

"Soâ€|" Gordon's voice suddenly rang in his ear, as the physicist lingered behind. "You gonna be settling down, and giving up this kind of life?" He asked, as he waved his hand back and forth between himself and Shepard, obviously drawing the attention to their wound riddled bodies.

"I dunnoâ€|" John shrugged, indecisively. "I hadn't really thought of that."

"Congratulations, Commander Shepard!" Another voice suddenly interceded. A feminine voice. A grating voice resonating with spite, insincerity, and condescension.

Both men glanced up to see the visage of a tan-skinned woman accompanied by a hovering white camera drone. She was donned in a silky red and blue dress, and had a lustrous, black head of hair that

hung around her face, just shy of her neck.

"Oh, no!" Shepard cringed, on sight. "What do you want?"

"Khalisah Bint Sinan Al-Jilani, Westerlund news." She announced herself, as she manipulated her omni-tool, causing the drone to shine a bright beam of light onto the duo, like the spotlight from a police helicopter. The drone caused Gordon instant discomfort. To him, it was clearly reminiscent of the Combine Scanners common in City 17.

"I just wanted to congratulate the illustrious Commander Shepard on his 'oh-so daring' rescue of the Carmenta Illustria, as well as his auspicious wedding engagement." She explained, without an ounce of sincerity implicit in her voice. "But tell me Commander, viewers want to know; how do you justify taking a luxury cruise vacation when so many people are left suffering back on Earth? Entire families slaughtered, millions upon millions dead or homeless, children left orphaned. Does none of that matter?" She barbarously berated, causing Gordon to reel at the display of audacity. "Forget respect for the dead." She snidely continued. "You did your job, it's time to reap the benefits, isn't that right? Not even the loss of your former Captain, David Anderson seemed to faze you!"

Shepard's brow tightened, narrowing his eyes with a repressed rage. "If I were you, I would stop right now." He ordered through his teeth, without equivocation, as his hands tightened into white-knuckled fists. "Because you are treading some mighty dangerous waters, Al-Jihlani!"

"Oh?" Khalisah eagerly shot back, as if joyful to have provoked such an emotional reaction. "Well then why don't we discuss something else? Like your ties with a known terrorist organization? A subject the Alliance has been inexcusably indifferent towards. How can you explain your reinstatement into the ranks of the Alliance Military when there've been no public affirmations that you've severed your ties with Cerberus?!"

John rolled his eyes, and shook his head. "Come on, Gordon." He insisted, motioning away with his head. "Let's get out of here."

The physicist simply complied, as both men gave their backs to the impudent reporter, and began to walk away.

"Oh yes, and that brings me to my next question for you, good sir!" She shouted, as she impetuously rushed in front of them, cutting them off, with her drone speeding by her side, shining its light in Gordon's face. He quickly stopped dead, squinting and shielding his eyes, with his head pulled back, as the reporter glared a hole right through him.

"I overheard the entire conversation with Admiral Hackett. Tell me, how delusional and-or mentally unstable do you have to be to claim that you are human history's own Gordon Freeman?" She brazenly imposed. "Is this some sort of tasteless publicity stunt orchestrated by Commander Shepard? Or do you truly believe yourself to be him?"

"Uh!"

"Ignore her, Gordon." The Commander stringently advised, with a sour scowl aimed at Al-Jilani. "She's just a vulture trying to advance her career through the degradation of others. Come on..."

The two men simply stepped around her, as if she were nothing more than a sign post. Khalisa looked on with a grimace, as she watched her story begin to walk away.

"You know, I wish you really were Gordon Freeman!" She shouted. "Because then I could ask the hard hitting questions humanity's been dying to ask for 200 years. Like how a man like that can dare call himself a hero, when some of the worst excesses of the Black Mesa Incident have been laid directly at his feet!"

Gordon stopped.

"There's even evidence to suggest that he was the one directly responsible for The Incident itself!" The woman callously reviled. "How can someone like that live with themselves - knowing that their hands are stained with the blood of an entire planet?"

Gordon trembled in place. His blood ran hot, as his body shook and his breathing grew shallow and rapid.

"Don't listen to her, Gordon." Shepard's words pleaded.

"You think I don't know that?" The grieved physicist declared, in a low rumbling voice. He slowly turned back around to face her. "You think a day goes by that I don't think about what I did?! That I don't live with the guilt!" He snarled - his voice growing louder and more unstable with each word uttered. "I never said I was a hero, damn it! And frankly I'm tired of being called one!"

"Uhm..." Khalisa uttered, at a loss; humbled by the woeful fire burning in this figures jaded eyes. Perhaps she'd bitten off more than she could chew.

Just then, she felt an unexpected tap on her shoulder. "Oh Khalisa..." A woman's voice beckoned her, from behind. As Al-Jilani slowly turned herself around, the last thing she expected to see was the scornful sneer of a battered blonde, with a clenched fist cocked back.

WHAM! A stiff right swing straight into Khalisa's jaw, sent her flying off her feet, and back first onto the floor.

"How DARE you treat this man so shamefully!" Cameron snarled, in a passion induced rage. "Gordon Freeman saved my life!"

"Ugh... Urgh... Agh...! Wha...?!" Al-Jilani grunted, groaned, and creaked - her hands wrapping around her throbbing chin as she sat up. "McClane?!" She shouted, in shock. "How dare you! When the station manager hears about this, the only thing you'll ever be able to get your face on again, is a wanted poster!"

"Yeah, yeah, beat it Al-Jilani!" Cameron demanded, as she awkwardly shook both her fists around. "Unless you want another knuckle sandwich, with a glass of punch, and a jawbreaker for dessert!"

Khalisa scrambled to her feet, still clutching her aching jaw, as McClane shuffled about, with her hands waving, showing she was ready for fisticuffs.

"You're gonna regret this, McClane!" Al-Jilani vowed, as she massaged her chin. "Mark my words!"

Cameron suddenly lunged at Khalisa again, feigning an attack and causing the black haired reporter to wince and cower, before quickly cutting her losses and retreating, with her tail between her legs.

"That's right! And I'm commandeering your camera drone, too!" She turned and shouted, with one hand cupped around her mouth, as the drone remained idly hovering behind her.

"Well, that was quite the assertion." John declared, pleased and impressed. "Thanks for the assist, McClane. I'm really starting to like you."

"It was my pleasure. Really!" She assured with a strong sense of gratification, as she clenched and unclenched her throbbing hand. "I'm sorry for her insolence, Dr. Freeman." She offered apologetically, with her back still to him - but Gordon was lost elsewhere, with his sunken, thousand yard stare, turned to the ground. "It's a shame she's considered Westerlund's best!" She's nothing but snide insinuations, disingenuous assertions, and tabloid journalism." After a lack of response, Cam turned back around to face the entranced physicist. "...Dr. Freeman?"

Gordon watched his gloved hands wrap around the handles of the delivery trolley holding the Xen Matter sample. He felt the nausea in the pit of his stomach, and the knot in his throat, like a noose tightening around his neck, as he pushed it in again. The blinding array of lights pierced his pupils once more, and suddenly

"Dr. Freeman? Dr. Freeman, are you alright?" A strange, yet comforting voice worriedly dragged him back to the present. "Dr. Freeman?"

"Huh?" He uttered, blinking rapidly, as he looked around and snapped back to reality. "Oh! Hello, Cameron."

"Hi!" She bashfully greeted, actually blushing as she gave him a subtle, gingerly wave.

"I was wondering what had happened to you."

"Yeah, nevermind that." She laughed, shrugged, and shook her head. "Uhm, listen!" She sheepishly continued, as she twirled one of her haphazard blonde bangs around between her fingers, and brushed it back behind her ear. "I was wondering! About that interview you promised me?"

"...Interview?" Gordon asked, with a distinctive gulp.

"Yeah! You promised me an interview back when we were in the AC Chamber remember? Would you mind if I conduct it now?" She softly implored, glancing back and forth between both men, with a hopeful countenance. "Can I interview you both?"

"Errâ€|"

"DID you promise her an interview, Gordon?" Shepard asked, with a chuckle, while the awkward physicist simply stood their, creaking.

"Ermâ€| Kind of, I suppose..." He hated to admit.

"Well then, Gordon." John began again, with a laugh, as he shook his head. "Aside from Combine, Collectors, and Reapers - it's your turn to face the worst threat in the galaxy. The pressâ€|" He ominously and jokingly warned. "Just keep it civil, would you, McClane?"

Back on the other side of the station, the restless rabble had begun to quiet and disperse. The patrons that were accounted for, safe and sound, were debrief, and sent on their merry way. And C-Sec provided the courtesy of contacting family and loved ones for the former hostages. They were also in the process of organizing shuttle flights back to Lycuna, after the horrifying ordeal. Unfortunately for some, their Citadel stay may be a bit longer than desired, as the acquisition of shuttles so soon after the Reaper attacks was easier said than done.

Observing all the hustle and bustle, was a lone salarian resting on a bench, pushed against the wall. He had one leg crossed over his lap, and his head rested against his interlocked palms, behind his head, as a profound feeling of fulfillment washed over him.

As he rested, he suddenly heard the all too distinctive metallic footsteps of a certain geth, as Legion's mechanical visage appeared, walking across the station.

"Legion!" Mordin called out, quickly garnering the machine's attention. "Come this way a moment." He entreated, as he waved the geth over towards him. "Something I've been meaning to ask."

Legion swiveled around on his feet, and obediently complied, as he made his way towards Mordin, who leaned back lax in his seat.

"Solus, Doctor." The attentive geth addressed the salarian, as he stopped directly before him. "We acknowledged. What is your query?"

"Took notice of something you said earlier. Intrigued me." Mordin offered up, with a curious grin, as he extended his arms across the span of the bench's backing. "Was hoping you could clarify."

"What is Solus, Doctor's query?"

"Back on the ship, whilst we were still under restraint-" The salarian began. "-when the belligerent krogan threatened to disembowel the asari child, you stood up - quite gallantly I might append-" He commended. "-and shouted 'I will not allow this to transpire.' You used 'I' instead of the inherent geth vernacular, 'we'." Mordin affirmed, with a perplexed eyebrow raised. "Why is that?"

Legion was silent for just a moment, as the metallic panels on his

head motored back and forth. "Scanning communications registry." He announced, as his optic aperture expanded and contracted, alternating the brightness of his light.

"Entry found." He quickly declared. "Solus, Doctor is correct. Error!" The geth exclaimed. He quickly raised his head, and the small panels on top perked up with what could only be interpreted as a geth's version of concern. "Anomalous programming detected. Scanning subroutines. We are attempting to build a consensus." He announced, as his optic light began to strobe and flutter rapidly, like the processing light on a computer.

At that instant, the bright white light of his face suddenly flashed red, for a split second, before going dark. The geth hobbled in place, reaching to clutch his head, as if he were about to collapse.

"Legion!" Mordin exclaimed, startled, as he stood up to help stabilize his mechanical team mate. Like a computer rebooting itself, Legion's face lamp gradually came back on, as his aperture refocused.

"Alert!" He warned, seeming to shake his head a little, as he steadied himself. "Anomaly identified. I have-" He stopped himself, and forced the correction of his words. "'We' have discovered reaper signatures embedded within our core processesâ€¦ We have failed to build a consensus."

A grim, pale look, like the fear of death itself, washed over Mordin's face, as sinking sensation churned within the pit of his stomach. "Reaper signatures...?!"

Meanwhile, back in the rear part of the station, Cameron fiddled with her omni-tool, trying to secure control of the lingering camera drone. Just then, the viewfinder screen lit up over her forearm, reflecting the world from the drone's perspective.

"There!" She exclaimed triumphantly, as the camera submitted to her will. "Perfect! This'll be great! My own exclusive interview with humanity's two greatest legends!" She looked up at the two stoic figures - battle scarred, statuesque epitomes of heroism and selflessness. They were an awe-inspiring spectacle standing together, but Cameron's eyes seemed to only gravitate towards Gordon. Despondence reflected in them, as she exhaled a low sigh. "You know, unfortunately, no one's ever going to believe you're the real Gordon Freeman without some sort of proofâ€¦"

"So don't tell them I'm the real Gordon Freeman." The antsy physicist instructed, as he shrugged and torqued his head around. "I honestly don't care for any of this... It's like I told you before, I'm not interested in any sort of undue fame."

"Aw, come on Dr. Freeman." Cam sympathised. "I believe you are who you say you are. And after everything you've done, you deserve some recognition. And humanity deserves to know that it's got one of its greatest champions back!"

"How 'bout this, McClane?" Shepard interjected, as he stepped forward, and summoned his omni-tool. "Aside from the vort's own testimonies, I don't think we can give you any kind of solid evidence

that this is actually Gordon Freeman. But maybe this is a start."

Cameron's omni-tool suddenly lit up, as John began transmitting something from his to hers.

"What's this?" She beckoned, intrigued, as a very detailed file about the One Free Man opened up on her screen.

"It's Gordon's dossier." The Commander informed, as he put his own omni-tool away. "That's the same file I received the day we pulled the man out of stasis." He acknowledged, with a quick nudge to Gordon's shoulder. "It details what happened in his last battle on Earth, where he was presumed to have been killed, and it even includes the location of the containment facility where he kept."

Cameron gasped with enthused anticipation, as her eyes and fingertips danced across the detailed file. "Would the stasis chamber still be there?!"

"It should be." John conjectured. "We left it undisturbed."

"That's great!" She exclaimed, throwing her hands up in the air, in an overjoyed outburst. "That should be all the proof we need! I can get some experts to date the facility! We'll get some reputable people to verify the logs on the chamber. Maybe get a DNA analysis of some hair samples or dead skin cells I'm sure we can find. We can date 'em, and cross check with yours!" She said, somewhat fawning over Gordon, as a starry, glazed over look shone in her eyes. "We can probably even get an expert bone-structure comparison with some old Earth Rebellion footage. Gosh, what more proof could I ask for?!"

"Okay! Let's do this!" She said, exhaling a slow, methodical sigh, as she adjusted the camera drone's angle, with her omni. "I'll start with a shot where I'm like talking about the hijacking, and then I'll sort of walk and pan over to the both you, and introduce you."

Whilst the energetic young reporter choreographed the chronology of her ensuing interview, much to Gordon's chagrin, something, or rather someone, peculiar caught Commander Shepard's eye.

Like worker bees in a buzzing nest, C-Sec Officers continued to run back and forth, in a fevered pitch. There was no rest here, no time for repose - but such was the norm in a police station. The peculiar thing, was that there was a man standing at the very heart of the station, with his eyes locked dead on Shepard. His flesh was pale - as sallow as a winter's fog. His pitch black hair was slicked back, his right hand clutched a dark, leather briefcase, and he was donned in a drab blue suit and tie ensemble - rather outmoded this day and age. Shepard had seen this man before. It was only for a second, but there could be no mistake - this was the same man he'd seen watching him from a balcony, as he fought for his life against an onslaught of Illustria Security Officers.

The ghostly figure gave Shepard a duplicitous smile, as he raised a hand to adjust his tie. He seemed to go completely unnoticed by den of law enforcers working around him. Just then, two such officers

criss-crossed before him, and in that split second - in the literal blink of an eye, he vanished from sightâ€¦

John furrowed his brow, as he began to look around - certain that his weary eyes were playing tricks on him, and he'd merely missed him walking away, but noâ€¦ Gone without a trace.

"Hmphâ€¦" Shepard uttered to himself, furrowing his brow and shaking his head, as he tried to disregard the phantasmal figure. But something in his eyes - something about that empty, icy stare, left him feeling uneasy inside, as a chill shuddered his entire bodyâ€¦

TO BE CONTINUED

46. Chapter 46: Coda

****Salvation: Episode I - The Taking of the Carmenta
Illustria****

Disclaimer: This fan-fiction is part of an episodic series taking place after Salvation: A Half-Life/Mass Effect Universe Fan Fiction, which will lead directly to its sequel, Salvation II: Project Prometheus. These episodes and sequel take place OUTSIDE of the Mass Effect 3 continuity. Characters property of their respective companies, Half-Life created by Valve and Mass Effect created by Bioware.

****Chapter 46: Coda****

An asari sat behind a reception desk at the top of a moderate flight of silvery stairs. Her work space was a little cramped, and a sign on the wall behind her desk spelled out: ADMINISTRATION in brightly lit letters. A large, locked, metal entryway more closely resembling a hatch on a battleship, rather than a door, was nestled into the wall, directly opposite of her desk, within the snug corridor. She had a stack of datapads on her desk, and lights flashed from a terminal, indicating incoming calls. But she was too enthralled by the breaking news events, unfolding on the large, holographic screen behind her, to notice.

"Reports are flooding in from the Citadel now, as we try to get a news crew on sight, that the missing luxury liner, The Carmenta Illustria, was indeed hijacked by a group of unidentified terrorists." A human, male anchorman reported, as he sat at a large, circular desk, with the words: WESTERLUND NEWS across it, in glowing orange lettering. A red bar was painted across the bottom of the screen, exhibiting his name: Trevor Callaghan. Directly below that, a rapidly moving news ticker scrolled through the headlines reading: TERROR ACROSS THE STARS - LUXURY LINER HIJACKED!

"Reports are sketchy at the moment, but we ARE hearing that the ship and all its passengers have been recovered safely." The young news anchor continued to report. "We are getting reports that the Alliance's own, Commander Shepard, may have had a hand its rescue. We're going to go live now, to Westerlund Field Reporter, Khalisah Al-Jilani, who is apparently live on the scene." As Callaghan waited for the screen to cut away, a voice muttered something in ear. He quickly pressed his fingertips to the earpiece in the canal.

"What's that?" He subtly whispered. "McClane?! You gotta be kidding me!" His face became etched with belittling disbelief, as the voice in his ear chattered away. "Alright, alright!"

"Ahem, my apologies." The stately anchor addressed again, with a clearing of his throat. "It is actually Westerlund's own, Cameron McClane, who is live on the scene. We take you now to a Westerlund News Exclusive - Cameron McClane, live on the Citadel with Commander Shepard."

The screen cut away, and the anchor's visage was quickly replaced with that of a slender, blonde-haired woman. She was donned in sky-blue dress, which was begrimed, tattered, and in shambles. Her once lustrous blonde-hair was frazzled, and unkempt, and a shining knot protruded from her forehead, whilst a swollen welt throbbed on her cheek.

"Thank you, Trevor!" She bestowed into the camera - speaking into her omni-tool, with a smile beaming from ear to ear, as if her injuries were non-existent. "I'm standing here, in the middle of Citadel Security Precinct 124, and as you can see from my mauled appearance, I have been through quite a horrifying ordeal. At approximately 9 P.M. last night, Lycuna Standard Time, the Carmenta Illustria was, in fact, seized by its own Security Force. Their intentions were to plunder the vessel, bereave the passengers of all their valuables, and traffic any survivors into slavery."

The captivated asari viewer dragged herself to the edge of her seat - her eyes glued to the screen, and her ears deaf to everything, but Cameron's voice. She didn't even hear the slow footsteps coming up the stairs.

"I was but one of thousands, who were subjected to this voyage of terror." McClane continued, as she began a slow stroll to her right, while the camera tracked her movements. "A nightmare we would still be living had it not been for the courage a few brave souls; two of which I have the most esteemed honor to be standing with right now..."

As she stepped over, two human figures came into view behind her. Both were beset upon by wounds and contusions that would've crippled lesser men. Their faces were swollen, their eyes were bloodshot, their once pristine white shirts were tattered, and soaked with stains of sweat and blood, but they both stood there and stood tall.

"The Savior of the Citadel, Commander John Shepard, and as unbelievable as this may be for humankind to fathom, the One Free Man himself; Dr. Gordon Freeman." Cameron introduced, as she stood between the two, with the screen perfectly framing both men.

"Rineya-" A familiar voice suddenly and unexpectedly called the asari's name, causing her to jump startled. "Give me a hand with some of this, would you?"

"Dr. T'Soni!" The asari at the desk exclaimed, with surprise, as she immediately switched off her HV, shot to her feet, and rushed around the desk to render aid.

The asari that had come up the stairs was donned in a sporty blue and white leather and nylon ensemble. She had somehow managed to lug a towering column of several large, but thin boxes up the stairs, on her own. Which was quite the feat considering that the stack was tall enough that it completely obscured her face.

"You're back sooner than expected, ma'am!" Rineya divulged, as she rushed in and took a steady hold of the unstable box tower. "You can let go, I've got it."

Taking her at her word, Dr. Liara T'soni exhaled a winded sigh, as she released her grip on the packages, leaving Rineya with the full burden.

"Oof!" She involuntarily grunted under her breath, as their collective weight was much more cumbersome than she'd anticipated. Her knees bent a little, and shook as she fought their insistence to buckle, whilst trying to keep the boxes steady at the same time. How had her employer just been carrying these, she wondered. She made it look easy.

"Ah!" The returning asari doctor breathed a homesick sigh, as she looked around and wiped her brow with her hand. "Yes, I wish I could've stayed longer, but unfortunately I have business ventures to attend to here. Still - it's good to be back."

"Uh-huh!" Umph!" Rineya acknowledged, as she trembled in place. "Where?" Where would you like me to put these, ma'am?"

"Oh!" Liara blithely exclaimed, as she turned to the locked hatchway leading to her office. "Just put them in here somewhere." She instructed, as she materialized her omni-tool and swiped it across the locked, red panel; turning it green. The large, rounded hatch clicked and spun around, like the dial on a safe, before immediately flying open, with a swish.

Liara floated into her sizeable, dimly lit office, with something of a whimsical air about her. What little light there was in her room was borrowed from the bustling stock tickers of the Nos Astra Stock Exchange right outside her broad window, on the floor below. The twinkling night sky had cast its shadowy veil over this side of Illium. And Nos Astara's various, glowing structures, towers, and pylons reached far up into the heavens, against a cascading horizon of dueling autumn and lavender watercolors, as the sun retreated into its nightly repose.

"Lights!" Liara called out, upon entering, coaxing the room to suddenly flare up with an artificial, white, luminance. Dr. T'Soni's office was rather lavish, and contemporarily adorned. A few stylish lounging couches were pressed up flush against the wall, adjacent to the entryway, and opposite of her sizeable desk. A few decorative furnishings were also scattered about, here and there, such as a pair of tall, standing lamps, and a few exotic houseplants.

Rineya lumbered in behind her employer; not quite so graceful, as she lugged the stack of boxes in.

"You can just drop those in a corner somewhere, Rineya" Liara assured, as she gave a dismissive wave with her hand. "Anywhere would

be fine.

"Y-yes, ma'am! Umph!" She creaked and groaned, whilst heaving the cumbersome tower of boxes to the nearest corner, where they'd be out of the way. As much as she would've like to just drop the boxes right then and there - Rineya had no idea of their contents or their value, so she took special, painful, care to ease them down as gently as possible. When she felt them reach the ground, she sighed with relief, as she pulled her fingers out from underneath - leaving them resting neatly on the floor.

"Whew!" Rineya exhaled, as she pressed her palms to her back, and arched her spine, in a stretch. "Pardon my asking ma'am, but what do you have in there? Rocks?"

"Yes!" Liara spun and declared with a suppressed burst of eagerness. "Xenian rock samples to be precise! Oh, goddess Rineya, Xen was amazing!" She proclaimed, in a voice that sighed with elation, as she began to reminisce in a daydream. "It's got an ecology like none I've ever seen before! The flora, the fauna, the geology! It was all so fascinating!"

"Oh, that's terrific ma'am." Rineya admitted, with a contented nod. "I can't wait to hear all about it. But there's something on the news I think you-"

"Oh, and the vortigaunts were very hospitable." Liara jumped in again, not waiting for her assistant to finish her sentence, as she walked around her desk, and had a seat. "I've studied them, somewhat, from records I've found in human history codices. But their depiction isn't all that accurate." She shrugged and shook her head, as she took up a datapad that was on her desk, and pretended to skim through it. "Humans seem to portray them as a simple, primitive race. But, nothing could be further from the truth - they're exceedingly intelligent. They're just accustomed to a more simplistic lifestyle, is all. For example, even though they're already fluent in human english; in my short stay, they actually picked up on my Thesserit a lot faster than I could pick up on their vortigese!" She eagerly continued to explain - disregarding the datapad even though she held onto it.

Rineya looked on, somewhat surprised at the level of interest her employer had taken. "I see!"

"I also found them to be powerful biotics, and astute telepaths." The accomplished archaeologist continued to explain. "They may even exceed asari capabilities, in that sense. But their abilities evolved much differently than ours did." She continued, speaking with the timbre and guise of a lecturing professor. "Rather than manipulate mass effect fields to generate barriers, or pulses, or to propel objects - they seem to concentrate their energy into potent bolts." She elaborated, as she pushed her hands out in-front, as if trying to demonstrate. "They also seem capable of triggering ionized reactions from the element zero in their eezo-rich nervous systems, which allow them to teleport across short distances. Teleportation!" She cried out, in an overexcited outburst. "Isn't that incredible?!"

"Yes. Astounding ma'am." Rineya concurred, though not quite matching her employers level of enthusiasm. "But listen. I really think you'd want-"

"I suppose I shouldn't be surprised by their evolutionary traits." Liara reclined back in her seat, and shrugged. "Did you know that Xen is actually about ten times richer in crude element zero, than Thessia? Relatively speaking, of course... After all, Xen's primary planetary mass is tiny. Really, it's no bigger than our second moon."

"Really...?" Her assistant asked - her eyes opening wide with genuine surprise "That small, ma'am? That's astonishing!" She claimed. "But, I think you really ought to turn on the new-

"Yes, it's miniscule!" Liara's fervent rant continued once more, as she shot forward in her seat again, with her elbows planted on her desk. "But see, here's the fascinating thing about Xen!" She began to demonstrate, with her hands up, as if she were holding their world within them. "The dwarf planet is so rich and abounding with natural eezo, that it actually generates these natural mass effect field pockets all around its main planetary mass. These pockets maintain a belt of massive asteroids, as big as continents, in constant orbit, WITHIN its own atmosphere!" She exclaimed, as she used the movements of her azure hands and fingers to try and draw the picture. "And they're brimming with life. Each one, a unique society and ecosystem unto itself! Imagine Thessia being the size of Glarius, our second moon - but then having each of our twelve continents hovering right above it. That's Xen!"

"And don't even get me started on the animal, and plant life!" She sighed, with overjoyed overexertion, as she melted back into her seat, once more. But she quickly perked back up again. "Oh, which reminds me, Rineya-" She shifted gears into a bit of a grim, foreboding tone, as she looked and pointed at her assistance. "I'm having a rather large, crated package delivered here later. Whatever you do, don't open it if I'm not around!" She sternly warned. "It's a Xen Tree, and they're very dangerous. Nearly got skewered by one, when my curiosity got the better of me."

"A Xen Tree?"

"A type of large, carnivorous plants on Xen. Very aggressive!"

"I see!" Rineya replied, with a furrowed brow, pondering momentarily about what it might look like, before quickly shaking her head and dismissing the thought. "Anyway, ma'am. You really should tune into the news." She insisted, as she approached Liara, walking around her desk, while summoning her omni-tool. "There's a report on I really think you'll want to see! I hope we haven't missed it!" She said, as she suddenly turned Liara's massive window, into a static-filled flurry of snow, with her omni-tool. The static didn't linger, however, as it was quickly replaced by the visage of a group of stately dressed asari playing an extravagant, orchestral piece on a stage. Suddenly, it changed to two teams of turians, mounted onto some sort of hovering platforms, as they attempted to guide a holographic sphere, with rapid-fire beams from their omni-tools, into the opposition's goal. Again and again the screen flashed and flickered, with media from around the galaxy, as Rineya attempted to seek out the appropriate human station.

Liara sighed, and rolled her eyes, as she rested her temple on her fist, and leaned against her arm rest. "Honestly Rineya, the news is

the last thing I want to see right now." Liara affirmed. "I had a long flight back, and I'm feeling a little shuttle-laggedâ€¦ The only thing I wanna do is curl up with a good sedimentary classification guide, and catalog my rocks."

"But it's about your friend, Commander Shepard, ma'am." Her helpful assistant assured, as she continued to skim through the stations.

"Ohâ€¦" Liara replied, showing a spark of enthusiasm, despite her efforts to conceal it. "Well, Shepard has been in the news all week. He did stop the Reapers, after all."

"This actually had nothing to do with the Reapers, ma'am." Rineya explained, as she flipped to a channel with 3 battered figures; the bruised, blonde reporter, a wounded physicist, and a bloodied Commander. "Ah, here it is. Have a look."

McClane had stepped to one side, with her omni-tool held up to Commander Shepard, whilst nestled closely to the fidgety Freeman.

"A handful of Blood Pack mercenaries boarded, with a moderately sized squadron of LOKI class mechs." John Shepard proceeded to naturally dictate, for the screen, with his arms locked behind his back. "Their numbers were bolstered by the ship's own security outfit, which had gone rogue. After seizing full control of the bridge, they subdued the passengers and herded them into the Promenade Deck. Tragically, for wanting nothing else but to keep his crew and passengers safe, Captain Arthur Ryback was executed at the hands of the offenders."

Liara looked on at the surreal broadcast, with a mixture of surprise, disbelief, and admiration reflected in her eyes. She could not believe that just one week after contesting against, and defeating, the most omnipotent force of destruction and annihilation the universe has possibly ever known - here he was again. She noted the LIVE stamp superimposed to the bottom left-hand corner of the screen, almost as if wanting to prove to herself that this was not happening now, but was rather a pre-recorded feed of one of his previous goodwill missions. But no, this WAS happening. The sides of Liara's lips curled into a pleased and amazed smile.

"Rineya, would you run and get me an iced lattÃ©, please?" She asked, now completely enthralled in the broadcast, as she sat forward in her seat, and used her opened palms to cradle her chin. "Thank you."

"Of course, ma'am." The obedient assistant acknowledged, turning and making for the door, as the broadcast continued.

"With communications down, and the defection of the ship's only line of defense, my - ahem - fiancÃ©e and I-" He smirked with a subdued giddiness - pausing only for a moment to clear his throat. But that moment took the ground out from under Liara's feet, as a gasp escaped her lips when her mouth fell agape. "-We decided to try and mount a covert assault. An operation which was severely complicated by the presence of a lost, young boy we'd rescued from one of the decks. Even so, he proved himself to be a courageous, stout-hearted little trooper. After moderate resistance, we managed to make contact with the Alliance, and began to mount an improvised counter-offensive. Unbeknownst to us, however-" He continued, as he shifted about on his

feet, and turned his attention towards the bashful scientist. "-Dr. Gordon Freeman here, who played a pivotal role in the downfall of the Reapers, had also evaded capture, along with my Second in Command, Miranda Lawson, as well as yourself, Ms. McClane." He nodded towards her.

"Yes, indeed." She subtly added, moving her omni-tool closer to her own mouth, as she turned about to face Gordon. "And although the experience was terrifying, I owe my own life, on more than one occasion this night, to Dr. Freeman. He saved me from being captured, rescued me from certain dismemberment within the innards of the vessel, and pried me from the ruthless, murderous hands of the vicious hoods themselves."

"But tell me, Dr. Freeman." She inquisitively continued, as she move her omni-tool closer to him. "How would you describe the ordeal, in your own words?"

Gordon stood silent and wide-eyed for a moment. He was like a stage-fright frozen child on talent show night. His pupils kept darting over towards Shepard, as if hoping he would jump in at some point, whilst a half-swallowed gulp had managed to lodge itself in his throat, and choke back any potential words.

"Mmmâ€¦ Ahemâ€¦ Uhmâ€¦" He coughed a little, awkwardly garbling something under his breath, as tried to force himself to speak. He huddled over a bit, moving closer to Cameron's omni-tool, almost as if trying bury his face behind it. "Was uhâ€¦ It was roughâ€¦" He said, in a hushed voice. That being said, he quickly pulled away, indicating he was done, and hoping this was over.

"Yesâ€¦" Cameron concurred, with a blithely nervous chuckle. "Rough to be sure. And if I may, I'd like to take this opportunity to thank you personally, live on the air, for your valiant efforts, and especially for saving my own life." She bestowed.

With nothing verbal to add, Gordon simply replied with a subtle, gracious nod.

"Is there anything else you'd like to add?" She queried, practically begging him for a comment with her eyes, as she moved her omni-tool back towards him. "Anything you'd like to say, to the viewers, about your heroic actions in the face of certain death? Or perhaps about your crusade against the Combine during the darkest period of human history? Anything at allâ€¦?"

"Uhâ€¦" Gordon stuttered again. His pupils continued to dart about, like a shuttlecock over a net. He clenched his lips and leaned in towards Cameron's omni-tool again. "Gladâ€¦ Glad to help."

Cameron sighed and smiled, as she granted him a grateful, acceding nod. She slowly turned back around to face the camera, and spoke into her omni.

"'Glad to helpâ€¦'" She proudly reiterated; with a reverent sense of grandeur. "Such simple words, and yet they resonate with chivalry, selflessness, and valor. Can we come to expect anything less from the Opener of the Way himself? The man who, nearly two-hundred years ago, on a night much like tonight, stood alone against an army of Combine Soldiers, as he had so many times before; fighting for freedom

against tyranny and genocide, only to meet his end in the battle of Calvary Road." She elegantly announced, with a genuine sense of admiration and respect shining in her eyes. "But as luck would have it, it seems the reports of his demise have been greatly exaggerated."

"Excuse me, Cameron." John modestly bestowed, with a sudden austere tone, as he took a step forward and glanced down at her, before looking back up at the camera. "That was beautifully put. And I apologize for interrupting you, but might I be allowed say one last thing? "

"Yes, of course, Commander." The journalist eagerly obliged, as she held her omni-tool up to him. "By all meansâ€¦"

"First, allow me to assert that what I say now, I say completely of my own volitionâ€¦" He proclaimed, pointing a finger down towards the floor, with an etched-in-stone expression of stoicism on his face. "I do not speak on behalf of the Alliance or on behalf of the Citadel Council. But one of the men who carried out this attack was a krogan who did so out of his own desperation for wanting a cure for his people. The krogan genophage is an abhorrent transgression bordering on a war crime." He asserted, with a sneering lip, and a fiery resolve in his dusky-hued eyes. "It was wrong when it was contrived, it was wrong when it was implemented, and it's still wrong today... Tuchanka has suffered long enoughâ€¦ Give the krogan a cure."

With his peace said, John Shepard stepped back, took a deep breath, and stood tall, with his chest puffed out and his hands clasped behind his back.

"Strong words, Commander Shepard." Cameron attested with a nod, as she turned herself back towards the camera, with her omni-tool before her. "Perhaps now, with an endorsement from the Savior of the Citadel himself, the Council races may finally elect to make reparations to the krogan people, and cure the genophageâ€¦ Only time will tell..."

"But in the meantime, I invite all our skeptic viewers out there to join me live tomorrow night, for a special Westerlund News investigative presentation-" She declared. "-as I delve deep into the Nevada underground, in search of the truth and an edifice known as the Mojave Delta Containment Facility - the alleged structure where Dr. Gordon Freeman himself remained alive and undisturbed, in a state of suspended animation, for the last two centuries."

"Until then-" She continued, her voice perking up with levity, and cheer. "-please join me in giving thanks to these two echelons of gallantry and valiance." The reporter declared, nestling herself between the two, in a manner so that all three of them would be perfectly framed by the camera. "Truly a case of an irresistible force meeting, and joining forces, with an immovable object. Which is which? We'll let you decide. Live, from Citadel Security Precinct 124, this is Cameron 'Action Cam' McClane, with your Cam on the action. Back to you, Trevor!"

Before the screen could cut back to the anchor in the newsroom, there was a sudden flash, and everything went dark - like a blackout after a powersurge. Liara looked around as her HV screen reverted back to being a mere window. At first, she thought it might've been a power

outage - but this idea was quickly slain when she noticed that the lights and figures from the perpetual stock tickers of the Nos Astra Exchange outside, were still lit.

"Wellâ€¦" A coarse, male voice suddenly creaked from within the shadow-choked room, causing Liara to spin in her chair, with a jerk; narrow-eyed and battle-ready. "I thought they looked rather classy, didn't you?"

"Who's there!" Liara shouted, peering into the darkness, as she shot to her feet, and ignited her fists into twin torches of indigo flame. "Who said that?!"

"But Dr. Freeman has always been one toâ€¦. ssshy away from the limelight. Always a bit of a rigid sort - he really must learn to relaxxx." The same hoarse, creaky voice rang out again, speaking with an almost supernatural essence, as it seemed to emanate from the walls of the room itself.

"Who are you?!" Liara demanded, trying to conceal a growing sense of angst in her voice, as she walked around her desk, turning in small circles and swiveling her head back and forth frantically. "Show yourself!"

"Be weary of the shadows, Dr. T'Soniâ€¦" The voice spoke up again - but this time it's location was a lot easier to pinpoint. "They hide more than you thinkâ€¦"

Liara turned with a jerk to face its definitive source; a small couch pressed flush against the wall, adjacent to the door and opposite her desk. Despite the cerulean flames on her hands illuminating most of the room, this one corner was still shrouded in darkness, as if no light could reach it. As if the darkness itself was not a mere lack of illumination, but a presence - a solid, tangible form. And there, in the center of the murky blackness, an icy-pale face hung staring back at her, with a conniving grin.

"You have five seconds to tell me who you are, and how you got in here, before I hit you with a warp field so powerful, it'll liquify you right where you sit!" She snarled, as she pointed a glowing finger at the figure, like she were pointing a loaded gun

"Now, now, there'll be no... need for that." The pale specter assured, waving Liara off dismissively. "Such violent... ssuggestions areâ€¦ beneath you. Quite unbecoming of someone of your intellectual sstatue, Dr. T'Son-i."

The way he spoke was very unnatural. Every word, every syllable was perfectly enunciated. But more than that, he seemed to speak with a snake-like hiss. He paused at awkward places, and placed the emphasis on the wrong syllables. It was as if language itself was a foreign concept to this man or creature.

Just then, he rose to his feet, and adjusted his tie. It was perfectly staight to begin with, but he adjusted it anyway. Perhaps doing so out of pure compulsion, or perhaps as a conditioned response to appear more natural

The ghostly figure casually stepped into the light, and for the first time, Liara was able gaze upon him in his entirety. He was a tall,

angular figure in a dark blue suit, a black tie and a dull, black set of dress shoes whose luster had long since faded. He had greasy, thinning hair slicked back, aqua colored eyes that swirled like a vortex, and flesh as pale as death.

"I'm merely a... mutual friend who's come to bestow someâ€¦ helpful information." The grim apparition continued to disclose, with his unsettling speech patterns. "Surely someone ofâ€¦ your trade knowss the value of information, hm?"

"Informationâ€¦?" Liara queried. Though not willing to admit that she found herself intrigued, she did allow the biotic blaze around her hands flicker and die, like a flame at the end of a used-up wick. After all, she did have a small pistol concealed under her jacket, behind her back, if she needed it. "What kind of information?" She demanded, as she paced behind the figure, who seemed to wander about the room, examining her curios, like a shopper in a bazaar. "What's the catch? No one gives for free."

"I must confess-ssomething, if I may." The hissing figure began to divulge, as he examined one of Liara's house-plants - stroking one of it's, smooth, waxy leaves between his fingers. "Over the course of myâ€¦ careerâ€¦ I have accrued a bit of... an affinity for individualss with a penchant for being in the wrong place, at the right time, as well fascination for those-sssâ€¦ who adapt and survive against all odds. They rather remind me of myselfâ€¦ Your friends are no omission, of course." He said, as he briefly turned back to face her, before continuing his self-guided tour around her office, with the asari in-tow. "Quite a remarkable menagerie - I've taken great delight in observing your little assoc-ciation for quite some time now, at the behest of my employers."

"As far as a catch goes-" He continued, as he approached her desk, and stared out her window. "I'm sure that will all become clear in the course ofâ€¦ Wellâ€¦" he shrugged, as he turned back towards her, with a duplicitous smirk. "I'm really not at liberty to sayâ€¦"

"What employers? Who do you work for? Why are you here?!" Liara sounded off with an adamant litany of questions - shaking a rigid finger at the ghoulish figure, whilst keeping one hand close to her back. "I suggest you answer me. My biotics are just a small part of my repertoire - I assure you I am quite capable of rendering you lifeless without them... "

"I am merely here to assstist you, Dr. T'Soni." The bleach-skinned human assured, as he turned; now standing face to face with the asari beside her desk. "I have what... you might call a vesssted interest in the coming course of events. And it's time for the pieces to begin taking their rightful places upon the boardâ€¦" He cryptically declared, as he glanced down at the idle datapad on her desk. He reached out, and with a subtle tap of his finger on the screen, it lit up; exhibiting a photograph of a drell, against the backdrop of a dreary, cloudy sky.

Liara's eyes took to the datapad, like moths to an open flame, as she immediately snatched it up off the desk. The photo was supplemented with a treasure trove of intel; call logs, surveillance footage, and detailed galaxy maps pointing to the garden world of Hagalaz.

"Feronâ€¦!" She uttered with a gasp. She'd become completely enthralled in the datapad - such was her nature. As she skimmed through the files, she never even noticed the phantasm-like figure turn and head for the door, in silence. "He'sâ€¦ He's alive!" She exclaimed, with a released exhalation of solace. "Where did you ge-" She began, as she looked up, still expecting to see the figure before her. As she glanced around, she quickly spotted his dark silhouette against the brightly lit hall, just as her door slid shut behind him. With datapad still in hand, she bolted off after him. It took her sizeable, silvery door a moment to turn and slide open again. When it did, she exploded out into the reception area, and quickly looked around. She immediately spotted him at the bottom of the stairs, turning the corner out of sight - he was much faster than she imagined. Liara practically flew down the moderate flight of steps, taking bounding leaps of clusters of five or six steps at a time. Reaching the bottom, she practically screeched around the sharp corner, when suddenly WHAM! "Umph!" "Oof!" Two asari collided like a car wreck, as krullers and coffee went flying into the air. Liara and Rineya toppled to the ground together, after crashing head on, and both were showered by a freezing cold deluge of iced latte.

Rineya sat up, looking about in a daze, as the biting espresso chill washed over her face and body. "Argh! Wh-whatâ€¦ Dr. T'soni!?" She beckoned, in a stupor, as she wiped her drenched face, and shook the excess off her hands.

Liara recoiled for less than an instant, as she shot back to her feet, unfazed, and continued her pursuit. She ran out into the open area of the Nos Astra Stock Exchange, and was confronted by the bustling, crowded hub of Illium's enterprising elite. Her eyes sifted through the crowd for the peculiar human. But picking him out at this point would be like picking out the proverbial needle in a haystack.

Liara clenched her lips and gave a single, damning shake of her head, as she turned back around. With her mind racing, she swiftly strolled back to her assistant, who was still sloshing about on the floor, in a puddle of coffee, soggy krullers and non-dairy creamer.

"Did you see which way he went, Rineya!?" Liara demanded, with little regard for her assistant's well-being as she walked over, took her hand, and jerked her back up to her feet.

"Huh? Did I see whatâ€¦?"

"The human!" Liara snapped back, with little patience left. "Where did he go?!"

"What human, ma'amâ€¦?" Rineya implored, with her brow furrowed in confusion.

"Goddess, Rineya! The human that just passed through here not ten seconds ago. He went right by you! Didn't you see him?!"

"...Ma'am." The assistant reluctantly began, looking at her employer as if she were crazy. "No one's passed through here. I would've seen them. You're the only one that-"

Rineya stopped dead, mid-sentence as Liara turned away from her

again. She looked back and forth, pacing up and down the small corridor, in a frantic bout, as if searching for some detail; some clue she'd missed. Just then, she turned about and walked back up to her assistant. Rineyea winced a bit, actually worried about her own safety, as she had never seen her employer in a worked-up state such as this before.

"I couldn't have imagined himâ€¦| Could I?" The perplexed archaeologist said, speaking mostly to herself, as she clenched her hands and furrowed her brow. Just then, her sights set back on the datapad lying on the floor, drenched in brown, sugary liquid. She walked over and picked up the pad - shaking off the excess fluid. With a few quick taps, the screen lit back up, still exhibiting all the information she'd received from the pale-faced enigma. "I couldn't haveâ€¦|"

[:::Connection Lost. Data feed has been terminated until further notice. Goodbye.:::]

* * *

><p>Author's Special Request: Wow, I can't believe it. I finally finished it! I know this thing which was originally supposed to be a "Short Story" turned massive, and it took WAAAAAY longer to finish than I ever anticipated, but thank goodness it's done! Huzzah! Several things in my life impeded the progress of this story - including a 1 year hiatus that I took due to being without internet or computer. But, here it is, and now I'd like to make a special request. For anyone out there, if you've been following my work - if you've been following this story, please leave me a review. Even if you've never reviewed before, please leave me your thoughts. I don't care if your review is praising or damning - whether you loved my story or absolutely hated it. Let me know what you thought, what you would've changed, what you'd like to see in the future etc. I accept all criticisms, because that's the only way we can grow as authors and artists. So again, please review. And thank you :D Hope you enjoyed.

Dr. Freeman and Commander Shepard will return in **Salvation: Episode II - Lair of the Shadow Broker**

End
file.